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Longard de Longgarr

THE MILLION

By DOROTHEA GERARD
(MADAME LONGARD de LONGGARDE)

Author of "One Year," "A Spotless Reputation," etc., and joint Author of "Reata," etc.

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THE MILLION

INTRODUCTION.

"THOMASZ MORAWEK, notary in Lyczyn, has presented a million florins to his native town for the foundation of an orphanage, destined for the education of motherless girls. We are informed that the money has already been deposited in the hands of the ecclesiastical authorities, under whose guidance the foundation is to stand."

When one frosty winter morning Lyczyn read this announcement in the *Wernowice News*—being too unimportant to possess a paper of its own—it rubbed its eyes and looked again.

A million florins! And the notary Morawek! And their own town! It was all printed there plainly enough. The notary they knew, and the town they knew—oh, quite by heart, both of them!—But the million! That did not seem to rhyme with the rest; it looked so incongruous as to provoke at first sight blank incredulity. To begin with, its mere existence —a million florins made by a man who had never left the place, therefore (it would appear) made here! The inhabitants of Lyczyn looked at each other with a dawning sense of mingled importance and aggrievement. Of course they had known that the notary must have made a good deal of money, but

a millionaire belongs to a different order of beings from an ordinary rich man, and the discovery that they had for years past been breeding this abnormity in their midst—though flattering to their vanity—was disquieting to their sense of economy. The natural impulse was, not to admire the generosity, but to feel one's self robbed; for the million—granting its existence—must have come out of Lyczyn pockets (with the help, no doubt, of those of the neighbouring Rostok) in driblets of course, but yet only from there. Every person who, within the last twenty-five years, had had only a receipt signed in Thomasz Morawek's office felt suddenly, though vaguely, as though he had somehow been defrauded of something.

But this was by no means the end of emotion and astonishment; for, at least, as incredible as the existence of the sum was its destination. A million given by a man who had never been known to give a florin! Whose house even the most incorrigible beggar had long since learned to shun! And the end! Why, the very one against which his whole life had been a protest: religious education,—the mere mention of which had always been wont to anger him more infallibly than a red rag does a bull.

"It is a hoax," said one of the readers of the *Wernowice News* with conviction. "Some youngster or other wants to put his back up; but it's a stupid hoax, all the same, and rather heartless, considering late events."

"I should think so too if it were not for this other paragraph. Listen to this:

"It is notified to us that on the first of the coming month Aleksander Rumowicz, late notary at Reclaw, takes over the office at Lyczyn, held successfully and honourably for more than quarter of a century by Thomasz Morawek, whom reasons of health have decided to retire into private life."

The two men—they were the apothecary and his assistant—looked at each other for a moment in silence.

"That sounds as if it were true, after all," said the assistant at last.

"Reasons of health, indeed!" sneered the principal, returning contemptuously to the pestle he had been wielding when the morning post came in. "When he hasn't fetched a pill or a powder for ten years! There you have the proof of what these newspaper reports are worth!"

"Well, well, but even without his health he has gone through enough to—"

"Make one give up a million?" said the grey-haired principal with a note of wistfulness in his voice and a glance of hankering desire in the washed-out eyes with which he doubtfully looked at the other grey-haired man, for the assistant was no promising youth; he was only an old man who had stayed behind in the race of life, perhaps exactly because his ideas about money were not sound enough.

"If the million smelt of blood, and other unpleasant things as well, then perhaps it would not be so difficult to give it up. Say, Krybow, would you take the notary's million as a gift just as it is, with

only the condition of taking along with it everything else that belongs to the notary's life—the daughter, the trial, the—the everything? Now, answer me fairly and squarely, would you?"

The old apothecary went on stirring his mixture in perplexed silence.

"Oh, I am not a philosopher like Thomasz Morawek," he observed, at last, with a sigh as deep as though he were in truth renouncing the gift.

BOOK I.

THE IDYLL.

CHAPTER I.

SOME thirty years or so before the conversation above recorded took place in the pharmacy of Lyczyn, two young men, or, to be more precise, students, who had that day passed their last examination, were sitting side by side on a bench in the Jesuiten Garten at Lemberg. The horse-chestnut foliage overhead was at its densest and also its dustiest, for the month was July and no rain had fallen for a week. It was only this evening hour which made a sojourn in anything but fresh air endurable; also all of Lemberg that had not fled to the mountains or the baths was streaming past the bench on which sat the two students, and toward the spot where the military band was drowning the echo of street voices in the strains of opera and waltz.

Of the two young men, one was brown-haired, diffident and quite ordinary; the other chiefly remarkable for the breadth of his shoulders and the massiveness of a head and neck which, in their solidity and muscularity, made the imaginative spectator think of a young bull, though one that

could not have been particularly well fed, to judge from the leanness of the large face and the loose hang of the clothes upon the broad figure. The forehead, too, in its width and eminently "knotty" formation, had something bull-like in its character, a forehead large enough and solid enough to run down many things and to fray a passage over many obstacles. And that it would willingly be put to such a use was as good as guaranteed by the keenness of the black eyes that looked out eagerly and yet quite steadily from under a pair of eyebrows that were already shaggy. A certain degree of shagginess attached too to the coal-black mane whose thickness served to make the head it covered look quite a size larger than it was.

In the conversation now going on it was the black-haired student who was the chief speaker, while his brown-haired companion listened somewhat disconsolately.

"This day week I shall not have so many people to look at," he observed now, with a touch of bitterness in the deepening of the folds about his lips.

"Nor I," began the other, when his friend turned upon him almost angrily.

"You! Why, you will have ten times as many. What is the Jesuiten Garten compared to the Vienna Ringstrasse, or the Stadt Park? There is as deep a gulf as between this and the market-place at Lyczyn."

The diffident young man looked surprised.

"I did not know you had been at Vienna!"

"Neither have I, in the flesh, but in my dreams

often, oh, very often! I daresay I have my Vienna better by heart than many a dweller within its walls. Oh, I'm quite reliable on the point! You can believe me when I tell you that to complain of your fate is blasphemy, rank blasphemy. Lucky dog that you are, unworthy of being placed in the very centre of the magic circle, right in the brunt of the heat and the light, while I—I who would know so much better how to use my advantages am banished to its extreme edge, to where the light scarcely reaches. Lyczyn and Vienna! Great God, why cannot we change places?"

"Oh, why, indeed!" sighed the sentimental one; "it is not I who would object. When I think that I shall probably never see Stasia again—"

His friend broke into a vigorously scornful laugh.

"I knew it! A woman's face between you and a whole capital! A few inches of pink complexion enough to hide your own good fortune from you!"

The other looked at him with limp brown eyes that were at once reproachful and astonished.

"It is strange you should not understand; but of course you have never been in love yourself."

"I? On the contrary, I am in love with so many different people that they tear my heart in pieces between them—with Kant and Hegel and Edison and Pasteur—with every one who has made a step forward on any field of thought, of science, of politics, or of society. My tastes are quite catholic, you see, and I am as ready to hail a new statesman as a new discoverer, even though he has only discovered a better way of fastening one's cravat than the

way our fathers fastened theirs, for, to say the truth, it's not people I'm in love with so much as things. Intangible things, some of them, but not the less seductive; things that lie in the air—Progness, Novelty, Modernity, call it what you like. The one thing that makes life exciting to me is the watching how it becomes different every year—not for the individual but for humanity in general, those whom the light can reach. Think of the flint-axe of our forefathers and of the breech-loader of our present day, and try and follow the gradations of human ingenuity which led from the one weapon to the other. Imagine even only the jump from a rushlight to electricity, and you will grow giddy with the thought of what there may yet be to follow, for, of course, everything is only a station on the way; nothing is final or it would have no worth. It is the moving on, the continual pressing forward which is so irresistible—to my imagination, at least."

"Then it is Science that you are in love with?"

"Not Science more than anything else that belongs to the Age. I have just told you that I am as ready to welcome the invention of a cravat, or of a sauce for the matter of that, as of a new philosophy: anything that brings it home to me that we are standing still on any field, even though it be that of mere material comfort. I have often tried myself to find out what particular phase of life attracts me most, but I have come to the conclusion that it is no phase in particular, but only the *newness* in the latest phase of each phase. Every sort of newness

seems to pull me its way, for newness means movement, and what I require for my happiness is to feel things stirring about me, to hear the groan and the creak of the machinery which grinds out human thought, to lay hand on it myself perhaps, or perhaps not, for it is not notoriety that I want: I am content to be obscure if only I am *there,* in the middle of the battle. What use is it, I ask you, to have been born in the nineteenth century if you live in a circle of thought that would have suited the Middle Ages? As well have been born in the Middle Ages then. Lemberg seems to you a capital, does it not? and tremendously far ahead; to me it becomes more provincial every day. I am grateful to it since it has brought me nearer the light, but it is an old dowd all the same; I have left it behind long ago. Nothing short of Vienna could satisfy me, and it is *I* who am to pass my life in a notary's office at Lyczyn!"

He finished with a toss of his black mane, and then, abruptly silent, sat and frowned with folded arms at the bare-legged children who in light summer frocks, hoop in hand, trooped past the bench, and at the fat Jewesses trailing elaborate gowns through the dust, too much overpowered by the sultry air and the weight of their own flesh to think of rescuing their flounced hems from destruction. The lanterns were beginning to shine among the trees and the invisible band was scattering the tones of the most frivolous of waltzes through the tepid summer night.

"Look at that woman!" laughed Morawek sud-

denly. "She thinks herself in the fashion, and yet I could tell her that her flounce is quite an inch too deep—they wear much narrower flounces in Vienna this season."

"Really, Morawek, you are extraordinary—"

"I am not extraordinary, I am only logical. When you follow a principle you must follow it to its extreme consequences, and the fashion of a woman's dress belongs as much to the age as anything else; it, too, is a link in the chain of development which began in the legendary fig-leaf, and will end —who knows where? But, I say, Popiel, let's get more into the thick of the crowd; it's almost dull here."

It was only as Thomasz Morawek rose that a complete impression of the man could be gained, the shortness of the stature disclosed, serving to accentuate yet further the breadth of the shoulders and massiveness of the head and face.

An hour later the brown-haired student and the black-haired student separated, not only for the evening, but for life. As natives of the same town they had seen something of each other during the four years that their studies had lasted, but they were to see nothing more henceforward. On this July evening their paths abruptly separated, the one being destined to an apprenticeship under a well-known architect in Vienna, while the other returned to take his place in the notary's office held by his father in Lyczyn, which position he was eventually to fill.

Whether the sentimental youth with the brown eyes ever became a man of his time is not known with

certainty, but despite the rush and din of the capital, it is probable that, for newness of ideas, he remained far behind his former companion of studies, now banished to the verges of civilization.

When Thomasz Morawek found himself transplanted back again to his native soil, his first sensation had been one of deep depression. Beauties of Nature were about all that Lyczyn had to offer, and for the beauties of Nature he had no understanding, for Nature remains always in the same place. The little town between the mountains and the river appeared to him only hopelessly dowdy and old-fashioned, stranded there, so to say, on the banks of the foaming Keremosz, and forgotten by the march of Progress. Dowdy and old-fashioned too appeared to him the little notary, his father, who had grown round-backed with pouring over acts, and in deference to whose wishes he was tying himself down to a monotonous existence. In default of the congenial spirits which he could not find in the flesh, he took refuge in those to be found in print, stuffing his head with everything that called itself a philosophy, whether sound or unsound, so long as it was only new; for, although he had said that all sorts of newness attracted him, it was nevertheless newness in *thought* that exercised the chief fascination. The coiners of German, of French, of English ideas—some of whom he agreed with and some of whom he disagreed with, but all of whom stirred his powers of reflection—they were all had recourse to. No one quicker than this young man to pick up an idea too bold to be more than hinted at, no one more eager

than he to help in demolishing traditions which he hated by a necessity of his nature, not because they were bad in themselves, but simply because they were traditions, and, therefore, must necessarily be old. In this way he had, before he was thirty, successfully rid himself of every shred of faith in a higher destiny of mankind, as well as of most of the scruples and prejudices which up till now have governed the world. He was free of other trammels as well, for instance, of the influence of his father —who had aroused his son's compassionate indignation by asking for a priest on his deathbed—and whose office he had inherited.

And now he was making another discovery, one that was to influence the rest of his existence, viz.: that this monotonous office of notary was a thing not to be so entirely despised as he had supposed. If his father had not flourished materially, it was clearly not the fault of the office, but of the individual, for the vicinity of Rostok well-nigh doubled the ordinary chances of profit. The son's quicker intuition and more robust conscience began to see opportunities all around him. It was not long before he caught a glimpse of the possibility of dying a rich man. Henceforward his plan of life took on a definite shape. It was now only that those eager but chaotic impressions which he had brought back with him from Lemberg finally ranged themselves. Money! Yes, that would be the key to unlock the door of his paradise. With money enough he could live where he liked in contact with congenial spirits, of which he knew they were to be found only in a

capital. With money he could taste to the full all the privileges, both intellectual and material, on which as a man of his century he felt that he had the claim of birthright.

In this interval two other things had happened to him, both of which, at first sight, looked like obstacles to his ambition. One was that he had been partially crippled—a carriage accident having dislocated his thigh, and the want of a doctor at the right moment having made the harm irretrievable. After a year passed on crutches, he reached the stage of a stout walking-stick and a heavy limp, but beyond this it was evident he could not get. When the first feeling of angry rebellion against Fate was passed, it appeared that, far from discouraging, the calamity had only stimulated his already overflowing energy. Soon he recognized that the infirmity was not one that could stand in the way of his special work. Is not a notary's life of necessity a sedentary one? Does he not require his head far more than his legs? Well, then, he would make his head work double to make up for the enforced idleness of his lower limbs. The less opportunity he had for taking walks the more would he have for signing deeds and pocketing fees, that was clear. Pushed back upon his work, locked in, as it were, in his office, he determined to fight an unkindly Fate with her own weapons.

The second thing that had happened to him was that he had got married—a more serious accident than the first, and apparently as irremediable. Again it was his father's wishes which had this to answer

for; though a mixture of what could at most be described as inclination and of convenience had lent their influence. Thinking of the matter in the light of his later ambition, his acquiescence appeared to him unpardonable, and almost ox-like in its docility, explicable only on the supposition that he had not fully discovered himself at that time; for clearly a man who means to make a fortune will always reach his end more easily when unhampered by family ties.

But Fate was evidently not going to be cruel throughout. Before six years of married life were completed he found himself a widower, with an only daughter upon his hands. That she must prove an inconvenient appendix to his household seemed clear: so clear, that certain stirrings of tenderness which he discovered within himself displeased his common sense as logically opposed to his theories of life. But before long he found the means of reconciling the two things. It was one day, when, entering the room which had been that of his wife, he found the little Romana dressed up in a shawl of her dead mother's, and with a feathered hat crushed on to the top of her black head and laughing at herself in the glass, that for the first time the idea passed through his mind, Supposing she were going to be beautiful!

From that moment on he began to see that, instead of an obstacle, Romana might yet turn out to be an instrument. A good-looking daughter is a valuable pawn to play in the game of life, and the sooner she was moulded into the right form the better it would be.

With every year, almost with every month, his plans began to grow more precise in detail. He had early calculated that by the time Romana was of a marriageable age he would be rich enough to realise his dream. He would take her to Vienna, where, with her looks and her fortune, she could almost certainly marry exactly the sort of man whom he would wish for a son-in-law: not necessarily a very rich or highborn man, but above all a modern one, one who would bring them both into direct contact with the modern world. And he himself would not be too old to enjoy his prize—barely fifty! Was there any reason why he should not live till seventy as his father had done? Which meant twenty years of the existence of a rich man in the heart of civilisation—an evening of life brilliant enough, surely, to make it worth while to labour throughout the day.

And with a will he laboured, never sparing himself and never missing a chance. If he remained honest in the literal sense of the word it is to be suspected that this was principally because a man of his perception could not fail to recognise that, for a notary—whose real capital lies in the public's confidence—honesty is in the long run emphatically the best policy. But within the limits sternly assigned to himself he knew of neither scruple nor squeamishness, and it is probable that, next to his clients' confidence, their ignorance was his most valuable possession.

Morawek belonged to those lovers of extremes who prefer laying their butter thick on a corner of their bread to spreading it thin over the whole. This

was why, despite his yearly increasing wealth, he continued to live as frugal a life as his neighbours. It was not here that he meant to spend his money, oh no! It was in the Promised Land of the capital, and right royally would he do it then; for he was something quite distinct from a miser—he was one of those men who, with all their eagerness, are able to wait, and it was exactly the combination of these two qualities which made him so formidable. That he might never reach that Land, never put his teeth into the thickly-buttered corner was of course possible—he saw it plainly, but did not on that account falter. In every game there is a risk, and he was playing a game with Fate, and was willing to take the risk, squarely, with open eyes.

And meanwhile the game was not without enjoyment. The evening hours during which he read the Vienna journals down to the last advertisement, and poured over the maps of Vienna—as a general pours over the maps of a country he means to invade—were moments in which he tasted some of the sweetness of his dream, even in advance. Immobolised, so to say, by his physical infirmity, his spirit flew out with all the greater ardour to meet its natural fellows which he knew must dwell somewhere within the shadow of Sanct Stephan. Neither time nor habit could succeed in smothering the spark of the particular sort of energy within him; rather through the very means of contrast and contemptuous comparison they had steadily fanned it into flame. As he had been in his youth, so in his middle age did Thomasz Morawek remain, a personification of that

tendency towards Progress, of that feverish desire to "get on" which torments humanity nowadays, and which is probably one of the necessary evils of civilisation. Occasionally this tendency concentrates itself in an individual, and makes of him a sort of fantastic abnormity, and this is what had happened to Morawek. How it came about that the Spirit of the Age should have selected for its victim a little notary in an obscure Galician town, who had never been farther than Lemberg, it is hard to say. Providence takes its instruments where it wills, and so apparently does Progress.

CHAPTER II.

On the low stone wall that ran round the bottom of her father's garden, Romana Morawek leaned with folded arms, and looked across the river at the mountains. It was the most enchanting hour of the day of the most enchanting month of the year—the hour before sunset of a perfect May evening. The fruit trees, which the lingering cold had kept back beyond their time, seemed to have burst into blossom overnight. Far up on the hillside, at unexpected places, trees which no one had suspected of being fruit trees had broken into flower, making dashes of white against the black of the pines: wild cherries and pear trees they were, grown probably from stray seeds carried up there by the birds, and now proclaiming their brotherhood with the orchards below. Vagabonds and outcasts of the family, they still persisted in wearing its livery. But better than all the beauty and all the perfume about was the exhilarating sense that this was only the beginning, that the winter was definitely done with, and the whole summer with all its glory still to come. This evening, with its settled sky and the deep yellow sunrays skimming the tree tops and the roofs, seemed like an inauguration of the festive season.

Romana felt it, as with bare head and folded arms she leaned, immovable, against the top of the wall. But what she did not feel was that she herself was the centre of the picture, that all the beauty of flower

and leaf around her was a frame scarcely worthy of her exquisite young figure. That promise of beauty which had abruptly revealed itself to Morawek on the day when he had found her dressed up in her mother's clothes, had been richly fulfilled: and it was beauty of that imperious, almost aggressive sort, which commands instant attention. Her mother had been of Roumanian birth, and although not beautiful herself, had handed on to her daughter those characteristics of an ancient race, which by giving to beauty something of a typical stamp, adds to it an element of interest especially capable of firing the imagination. The coal-black hair growing rather low on a white forehead, the very sweep of the eyelids, the set of the head upon the shoulders, the carriage of the nobly proportioned figure, they all might have belonged to some maiden of ancient Rome, and had in all probability come to her with some drop of that Latin blood of which so many traces are to be found in Roumania. Perhaps she lacked colour a little, but it is to be questioned whether any tint of rose could have worthily replaced that wonderful warm whiteness of skin out of which her black eyes glowed so deeply. An energy that bordered on wilfulness was to be read in the somewhat too strong moulding of the chin as well as in the very lines of the now immovable figure. And over it all lay that intangible veil which can best be likened to a mesh of dewdrops, and which means that the woman is not quite a woman yet, but is living her last hours of childhood. Despite her precocious beauty—the early beauty of a Southern

race—Romana was not yet seventeen; a child in thoughts and desires, although a woman already in stature.

The road which ran straight past the wall melted indefinitely into a stretch of rough shingle, beyond which the river rushed with all the impetuousity it had brought with it from its mountain home. There were no rafts moving at this hour, but on the opposite bank a group of them moored for the night were bathed just now in a light so golden that they appeared to be solid bars of gold, and not rough-hewn pine stems. Beyond that the roofs, not of Lyczyn, but of Rostok—the sister towns being separated only by the Keremosz and united only by an exceedingly primitive bridge; beyond that again the amphitheatre of the hills. From over there came the sound of a church bell, the very thing a-wanting to complete the repose of the picture. Romana felt that too, although the church bell really meant nothing to her, since she never went to church. It signified only that the people at Rostok were wasting the hours of this perfect evening inside the walls of a by no means beautiful building, singing hymns to the unreal mother of an unreal god. And the people at Lyczyn were about to do the same thing, it appeared, for now another bell rang out on this side of the river, close at hand. The devotion of the month of May is indeed a universal custom of the country. There were some people going to it now, before her eyes, for the road that ran past the garden wall was one of the approaches to the church.

When, half an hour later, they came streaming back again the sun was behind the hills, and the rafts on the river had resumed a quite prosaic appearance, but Romana was still at her post.

"Is that you?" said a voice from out of the falling dusk; and, looking round the group of young girls that had halted on the road, with all of whom she was slightly acquainted, and each of whom held a prayer-book in her hand, Romana answered not very graciously:

"Yes, it is I;" but immediately she added, "but is that you, Aniela? I didn't know you were in Lyczyn."

"Yes; I have been spending the day with my aunt; and as it was too late to get back to Rostok when the bells began to ring, I went to the service here. I have been trying to drop in upon you since morning, for I have something to say to you, but Aunt Marta would not me go."

"I saw you when I went to church," said another, "and you have been here ever since?"

"Yes."

"A dull way of spending your evening!" And several of them laughed rather pointlessly.

"I find it less dull than your way," said Romana with a touch of irritation. She was aware of the eyes of all the church-goers upon her, looking at her with a mixture of curiosity and disapproval. "I've been past the open door, and I know that your choir sings out of tune, while the birds here never give a false note."

"Oh, the lilacs!" cried Aniela, probably by way of making a diversion. "Couldn't you let me have some of them? They're the first white ones I have seen out!"

"You can have the whole bush if you want them for yourself."

"I—I wanted them for the altar of the Madonna," faltered Aniela a little guiltily. "They are the best white lilacs in the town."

"Impossible, Aniela! My father would never forgive me if I let anything out of the garden go to the church. And, besides, they might infect your devotions," and she laughed too bitterly for her age.

There was a pause of embarrassed silence.

"Didn't you say you had something to tell me?" began Romana presently.

"Yes; about the *Mayalis*. We're going to have one on Monday, and we want you too. Your father will let you come, will he not?"

"A *Mayalis?* What sort of an animal is that?"

"Not an animal at all, but an ancient German custom. Herr Weber has been telling us of it, and it sounds so nice that, even though we're not Germans, we want to try it here."

"Who is Herr Weber?"

"He's the new engineer who has got Pan Pientek's place," answered several voices together. "And such an improvement on Pan Pientek! So good-humoured and ready for anything!"

"And so good looking!" added some one in the background.

"He says we are all asleep," explained Aniela,

"and that he means to wake us up; and he's going to begin with a *Mayalis.*"

"But you haven't told me yet what a *Mayalis* is?"

"Oh, well, one spends the day in the woods, you know," explained a big, excitable girl, "and dines on the grass, and one brews a sort of drink from a particular sort of flower that only blooms in May, and one has music and songs and, of course, dancing. It's really only a sort of picnic with a special name, and as good an opportunity of having some fun as any other!" laughed the speaker, beginning to fidget on her feet, as though she already heard the dance music.

"It sounds nice." Romana's tone was different already.

"But you have forgotten the chief thing," said Aniela, "the *Mai Königin;* for it belongs to the old custom to choose a queen, whom every one has to obey all day, and that is the real reason why we want you; for, of course, it is clear that you must be our queen, Romana. Is it not so?" and she looked about her at the others.

"Of course. Oh, yes, of course," said several voices in different tones, none of which showed a trace of Aniela's enthusiasm.

"Herr Weber wanted *me* to be the queen," laughed Aniela with a touch of confusion. "Just imagine! With my stature! But I told him that unless I grew two inches before Monday I should bring him a substitute, and one whom he could not help accepting; one on whose head a crown would sit far better than on mine. Really, for the honour of our two

towns you must come, Romana darling! You will come, will you not?"

She stretched up to reach Romana's hand on the top of the wall, but could barely touch it with her fingers. Through the dusk nothing but her small, neat silhouette could be distinguished, as well as the rapid grace of her movements, but the voice seemed a guaranty for at least the pleasantness of the half-invisible face.

"Yes; I will come if my father will let me, and I will make him let me," added Romana with an obstinate inflection of her voice.

"It will please Aniela and it will annoy the others if I go," she said to herself with a malicious gleam in her black eyes, while mounting the slope of the steep little garden that was as full of perfumes as a box, and among whose shadows only the white lilacs made ghostly blotches of white.

Despite the assurance with which she had spoken, she was not sure of her father's consent. He had always looked askance on anything like intimacy between Romana and other girls of her age. She was being brought up for quite other ends than they, and could gain nothing by contact with these provincial minds. One by one the visitors had dropped off, discouraged, all but the persistent Aniela, whose childishly enthusiastic admiration for her friend had enabled her to brave the coldness of the notary. Judicious courses of reading was what he desired his daughter to fill up her time with, and in the many hours of enforced solitude Romana had read immensely more than most girls of her age and also

a very different choice of things, for Morawek selected the books carefully and supplemented what was in the books by explanatory discussions, which Romana's eager spirit readily drank in. The result could scarcely be doubtful to a man who was himself swayed almost entirely by ideas and hardly at all by feelings.

So long as she was happy—and as yet she had had no occasion to be unhappy—Romana found nothing seriously wrong with her father's materialistic theories. Sometimes only a momentary perplexity would come over her, as, for instance, when she saw somebody in grief, for she had noticed that the first thing a person freshly stricken does is to begin to pray; and, despite herself, she could not help wondering what she would do, supposing that some day she too were to become unhappy—or to whom she could pray! According to her father and to the writers whose works he put into her hands, the God whom other people prayed to was an invention of the priests. The theory sounded reasonable, but it seemed to hold good only for happy people. Once when she made this objection to her father he answered with a disdainful laugh that it is only people of limited intelligence, and more particularly unsuccessful people, who were ever unhappy.

"And *I* mean to be successful," he added with his own supreme assurance, "which means your success as well, so there is nothing to trouble about in that direction."

"And yet there are people who fail through no fault of their own."

"Even these need not be unhappy with only a grain of philosophy. Every one knows or ought to know that he is playing a game with Fate. Even if he loses, he has had the excitement of the game, which without any other reward is surely worth the monotonous existence of the stupid crowd."

"Yes," said Romana; but there was still a doubt in her eyes.

"But there are other things," she remarked after a minute. "Illness, for instance, or bereavement: have you remedies for those too?"

"I have, at least, an answer to the first objection, and that is that nobody need be ill unless he wants—beyond a certain point. For every sickness on earth there is one of two remedies; cure or death. Either the illness is bearable, and then one bears it, having made one's calculations and found that the discomfort is outweighed by other things, or else it is not bearable, and in that case one dies in one of the many perfectly painless ways which are supplied by modern science, and being unhampered by the scruples of those hypocrites who pretend to see in life a trust which will have to be accounted for."

Romana said nothing this time, but sat with her elbows on her knees and her chin in her hands, while her great black eyes studied her father's face. What she felt for him was not so much filial tenderness as the admiring affection of a disciple for his master, mixed with an awestruck wonder at these qualities of mind and of will which appealed very loudly to her own nature. Sometimes, however, he frightened her a little, and the hard, masterful words pro-

nounced just now—words that were so mercilessly far from all human weaknesses—kept her silent and thoughtful for some minutes.

"Well, and the bereavements?" she asked at last.

This question was evidently not quite so easy to answer as the last, as Romana could see by the familiar toss of the head with which the notary shook his mane back from his ears. But he had never yet failed in a reply, and he braved it out now.

"In the first place, I must remark that a bereavement presupposes affection for individuals, and I have often told you that affection for individuals—although I admit its existence as undeniable—is not indispensable to human happiness. Examine the origin of these affections and you will find that, strictly and logically speaking, they are the result of one of two causes—habit or chance. It is absurd to suppose that if this particular person had not existed or had died in infancy we would have found no other person with whose company to be pleased. The best proof is that parents love their adopted children exactly as intensely as their own, if only the habit lasts long enough. It follows that we cannot be bereaved of anything that is irreplaceable. It is always possible to find a substitute, and if it were not possible, then it is only old women or school-girls who could be comforted by fables about meeting in another world. It is exactly this looking forward to an illusory meeting which prevents their finding consolation here, which it is ten to one they would do if they looked about them, instead of keeping their eyes screwed up to the skies. If people

had the courage to say to themselves, 'It is over and done with' they would have much more chance of finding comfort in all sorts of shapes around them."

"So if something were to happen to me," remarked Romana with a whimsical little smile, "the first thing you would do would be to look about you for another daughter to adopt?"

"Why should anything happen to you?" asked the notary with a sharpness that did not seem perfectly to accord with the creed of indifference just pronounced. He laughed a little harshly as he added in his usual tone, "You forget that I was only speaking of people who cannot live without affection."

These and many other similar talks did Romana turn over in her mind without her reason being able to find anything absolutely wrong with them, and yet with a vague sensation that something was a-wanting somewhere. The almost fierce sincerity of her father's beliefs and disbeliefs she could, at least, not doubt, since several years before he had startled the world of Lyczyn by having himself officially registered as *confessionslos*—that is, as belonging to none of the recognised religious creeds. Considering that his clients consisted largely of peasants—that is, of religious fanatics—it was a bold step to take, and he did not take it until he felt quite sure of his place. It was the best way of protecting Romana from anything in the shape of compulsory religious instruction, also it satisfied the craving within him by proclaiming his mental kinship with the most "advanced" spirits of the age.

This fact in itself would have been enough to create for Romana a peculiar position at Lyczyn, to place her quite apart from the girls of her age. Brought up, all of them, after the strictly conventional religious pattern, it was inevitable that they should look at her askance as at something so abnormal as to be almost scandalous. A girl who does not go to church, who cannot help being a Christian only because she happened to have been baptised! It was impossible surely—at least, for provincial minds—not to think some evil of her. Romana read it in their glances, and, despite the proud self-reliance within her, felt the tacit condemnation keenly, and for that very reason never lost an opportunity of scoffing at their mediæval-sounding faith, regarding which a little secret curiosity was yet wont to torment her. Aniela was the only person to whom she never threw out a disparaging remark about religion, but that was only because Aniela was also the only one who never looked at her with curiously critical, but only with admiring eyes. Not that her atheistic creed did not cut her little friend to the quick, but that all hopes of converting Romana to her own way of thinking had early been crushed by Romana herself making it a condition of friendship that religion was to be left out of their talks; and Aniela, unable to renounce the company of her friend, had acquiesced, heavy-hearted.

Romana, sitting alone at the supper-table that night, listened more impatiently than usual for the sound of her father's stick upon the floor of the short bit of passage which separated his office from

the domestic apartments. When she heard it at last rapping along the resounding pine boards, she could sit still no longer, but, meeting him at the door, put her eager question about the *Mayalis,* supplemented by a rather hazy explanation of what a *Mayalis* is.

"One sits on the grass, you know, and plays music—at least, the music band does that—and then one drinks something, which is made of some flower or other—it's *we* who do that—and Aniela says it is such fun!"

"Patience! patience!" said Morawek, smiling a little, in spite of himself. "Let me rest my leg and still my hunger; I haven't had a bite since twelve o'clock."

Having been served in a great hurry by Romana, he began while vigorously chewing his cold meat:

"What is it you want to do, exactly? Sit on the grass, and do—what?"

Then Romana explained a little more calmly.

"A *Mayalis?* Yes, I know; one of those hare-brained customs which I thought had died out long ago. And you mean that that sort of thing would amuse you?"

"Why not?" she said boldly. "It must be just beautiful in the woods now, when it is so beautiful in the town already. And Aniela wants me so much to go; in fact, I have almost promised. You will let me go, won't you? Just for once in a way; what harm can it do?"

Morawek attacked another dish without at once answering. His appearance had not changed in any vital particular since the day he had sat under the

horse-chestnut trees of the Jesuiten Garten. Now, as then, he gave the impression of breadth, shortness and massiveness, only that the massiveness had increased with the unavoidable increase of flesh which yet did not reach stoutness, and that the looseness of skin upon the large, densely bearded face was now less apparent. The mighty forehead had grown rugged with knots, the mane of hair—thick as ever—streaked with iron-grey, while the shaggy eyebrows were well-nigh ragged. Whoever nowadays met the thick-set, carelessly dressed figure limping along the uneven pavement of Lyczyn—where it had for long been one of the characteristics of the place—would have thought to meet one of those European savages who seem to be natural rebels against the rules of civilisation. How could he suspect that this man with the wild hair and the ill-cut beard was in reality one of civilisation's fanatics, who lived so much in the future that he could not find leisure to pay attention to the details of the present?

"What harm can it possibly do?" he was now repeating to himself as he looked across at Romana while thoughtfully crumbling his bread between his fingers.

Lately it had occurred to him once or twice that the moment for carrying out the matrimonial part of his programme was rapidly approaching. In truth, there was no reason why he should not realise the whole of his dream immediately—give up his practice and go to Vienna, for the fortune acquired was sufficient by this time. And yet there was a

reason, one which—with all his acumen—he had not foreseen—and it lay in the fortune itself. He had wanted it but as a means to an end, but he had not known that by cultivating a means this sometimes finishes by becoming an end in itself. The habit of accumulating money is one of the most tyrannical of habits, and by dint of laying one banknote on the top of another and rounding off one thousand after another, Morawek—like so many others before him—had fallen victim to the fascination of the occupation: to that charm of the complete sum which lures one on and on. Now he had actually got within sight of his first million, having succeeded beyond his most sanguine hopes. Was it possible to hold his hand before it too was rounded off? It did not seem so to the man who had done nothing but calculate for twenty years, and to whom figures had become something alive and personal. In less than two years the million must infallibly be full, and Romana was only sixteen now—a mere child; surely it would be time enough to think of marrying her at eighteen!

Once or twice he had been on the point of taking her into his confidence on the subject, but had always refrained, partly from some incongruous shred of delicacy, partly because of the dread of arousing a certain spirit of contradiction which he had remarked in her. There was no saying how Romana might take it if she found out that her fate had been decided for her in advance—that she was to have as good as no voice in the choice of a husband. For this reason too he had refrained from initiating her

into the more intimate details of his plans. This was his own private secret—no true *Slav* is quite happy unless he has something to keep hidden from all eyes save his own. And it was in his own room, behind closed doors, that he diligently studied the maps of Vienna. A certain sentimental attachment to her native soil which he had observed with disapproval made him fear some opposition to the theory of a plan which, once realised, would doubtless carry all before it.

Meanwhile, there was no object in letting her mope; and since she had set her heart on this picnic, it would be as good a way as another of keeping her amused. There would be young men there, he supposed, but his contempt of his fellow-citizens was so profound that the idea of one of these finding favour in Romana's eyes never so much as occurred to him. He knew them all by heart, had seen most of them in his office at some time or other, and could not discover in any of these provincial lady-killers the slightest danger to Romana's peace. And, after all, she was only sixteen! So the result of his reflections was that just as Romana was going to burst out with a fresh appeal he said indifferently, almost a little absent-mindedly—for his thoughts were beginning to run on something else:

"Yes, yes; you can go for this once," and immediately added:

"Where is the evening paper? There must be something more about the experiments in wireless telegraphy."

CHAPTER III.

"WHO is that?"

It was Romana who asked the question of Aniela at the moment when the two girls alighted from the peasant cart which had brought them to the chosen site of the *Mayalis*. Other carts, five or six in number, followed this one, all filled with light dresses and straw hats and young, laughing faces of both sexes, to which the common determination of enjoying one's self at all costs gave a superficial look of relationship.

And truly the task did not seem hard under the circumstances. The start had been an early one—even now it was scarcely more than ten o'clock, an hour at which Nature's face appears yet fresh and unstained from her beauty sleep. All along the length of the road, which closely followed the windings of the river, the shady side of the valley and the sunny one had made a double picture to look at, while the swift, foaming Keremosz—in whose hurrying waves all the green of the pine forests that bordered its sides seemed reflected—changed restlessly between light and shadow, showing sometimes the gem-like transparency of crystal, sometimes rolling black and seemingly fathomless beneath a sheer wall of rock. The nightingales had been singing all night in this paradise, and here and there a singer's voice came from across the water, faint

and colourless, somewhat like that of a belated reveller who cannot make up his mind to go home, and giving that whimsical impression of dissipation which a nightingale's note in full daylight ever conveys. It is not likely that any one even heard his exhausted voice, except, perhaps, Romana and Aniela, and these principally because they had no society beyond Aniela's comfortable, commonplace mother and the only middle-aged man of the party. In the other carts there was far too much innocent, if somewhat pointless, gaiety going on, far too many smart repartees flying about (even mild practical jokes being played) to have leisure for noticing whether one was driving through a desert or a garden, or whether one had the song of birds or the howling of wolves in one's ears. To young people of this particular provincial description an excursion is not a raid into the heart of Nature, but a new and more original setting for a flirtation that is either in bud or in flower, and there were plenty of these, both at Lyczyn and at Rostok, for the company of to-day was recruited from both sister towns.

"Who is that?" repeated Romana, taking hold of Aniela's arm; "and why does he look so happy?"

On the clearing in the forest to which they had laboriously bumped on a woodcutter's track the preparations were rapidly progressing. Inconvenient trails of thorn had been cleared out of the way; the music—four Jews with fiddles—had been discreetly posted in the shadow of the wood, where the down-hanging branches gracefully masked their by no means ornamental figures; shawls and rugs had been

spread upon the grass, while in the centre of the space a hatless young man, from the waves of whose light-brown hair the sun was striking golden lights, was occupied with the building up of what looked like a huge sofa of moss. More moss lay ready on the ground beside him as well as a litter of hawthorn branches, of cowslips, of deep-blue forget-me-nots, of glistening marsh marigolds, while at every moment some helper—a barefooted peasant in linen shirt and trousers—emerged from the shadow of the wood laden with another armful of flowers.

"That is Herr Weber," said Aniela; and if Romana's attention had not been already riveted, she might have distinguished a note of pride bordering on proprietorship in the tone of the reply.

Just then the young man looked up and saw the two girls at only two paces from him. His first movement was evidently not entirely of pleasure.

"Already!" he said while a look of almost ludicrous distress crossed his boyish face. "I did not want you for another half hour, at least."

"That is true politeness!" laughed Aniela; but at that moment she saw Herr Weber's eyes stop with a look of astonishment upon Romana, and she remembered her social duties.

"This is Herr Weber, Romana, who has been so kind as to arrange the feast; and, Herr Weber, this is the May Queen I promised you. Can you say that I have not kept my promise?"

Again her voice rang with that same note of pride as she looked almost triumphantly at Weber.

The organiser of the feast and the May Queen

chosen for him in advance exchanged a conventional bow and one of those swift, scrutinising glances with which human beings who meet for the first time attempt to take each other's measure. What Romana saw was a tall, fair-haired, fair-faced youth with a much fresher colour than most of the young men she had yet met, and with a look of gladness in his brown eyes such as she had never seen in any one, and which had caused her first instinctive question: "Why does he look so happy?"

What Felix Weber saw was probably the most beautiful and certainly the most striking woman he had ever met in his life.

"Yes; you have certainly kept your promise," he said slowly, having looked at her rather longer than was quite conventional.

"What *are* you doing there?" asked Romana, in whom curiosity had quickly mastered a moment of embarrassment. "I suppose all this moss has an object, but really—"

"A very weighty object; can't you guess?"

His white and rather square teeth shone out in so sunny a smile that from merely good looking he became distinctly handsome. Romana had already said to herself that he had "good" eyes, she now added inwardly that he had also a "good" smile.

"A sofa, perhaps, to rest on when we are tired?"

He shook his head.

"An altar, then, on which you mean to burn some holocaust to the spirits of the forest? But the altar itself would burn faster than any victim, surely!"

"If I had wanted an altar, I would have chosen a rock."

"Then I give it up."

"Already! Why, a throne, of course; *your* throne, since Panna Aniela has decreed that you are to be our *Mai Königin.*"

Romana glanced at her friend alongside.

"Is Aniela's will law? You can choose another queen if you like."

Her eyes went back to Weber and rested there for an instant with the fascination of an experience that was quite new to her, for this was the first time in her young, secluded life that she was beginning to discover within herself a power she had never suspected.

"No; I do not want to choose another queen," he said so gravely that Romana, almost frightened, went on quickly:

"But what are you doing to my throne, then? Is it not high enough yet?"

"High enough, but not nearly beautiful enough. I meant to have pressed all those things into the service—the hawthorns for a canopy, the cowslips for a garland, this moss for a footstool, the marigolds for a crown—it was all to be ready before any one came."

"And now that we are come we can help in the decorations," decided Romana, uncovering her coal-black hair as she threw her hat on the grass. "If I *am* to be a queen, I mean, at least, to have a hand in the fabrication of my insignia; and I am sure

that Aniela and I will make a garland far better than any man in the world—can't we, Aniela?"

"Better certainly than any one except Herr Weber," said Aniela with a shyly admiring glance towards him. "You can't imagine how clever he is about these things!"

"That we shall see," pronounced Romana, sitting down upon the nearest heap of moss and plunging her bare hands into the fragrant flowers.

The rest of the party had by this time come up, and the little scrap of private talk became submerged in a sea of greetings and exclamations and coquettish questions and facetious answers and general jocose hilarity, of which Weber unavoidably remained the pivot. A descendant of one of those German colonists who have got so firmly rooted in Polish soil as never again to have left it, and despite a strong admixture of *Slav* blood in his veins, Weber still remained at heart a German. He had inherited from his paternal ancestors a sort of sentimental attachment to the fatherland which he had never seen, and even to its legendary customs. This *Mayalis* of his was a little the outburst of one of those patriotic movements and a great deal the result of having a little more energy than he knew what to do with, as well as of the desire to see others enjoy themselves as much as he loved to do. But to-day there was an element of something more than mere enjoyment in the scene. Although separated from Romana by the preoccupations of the moment, his eyes could not keep from ever returning to the spot where she and Aniela sat side by side,

weaving at the same garland of cowslips, and in so doing he made a discovery which rather disconcerted him. Until to-day he had thought Aniela extremely pretty—and she was pretty in her small, dark neat way, with her smooth hair brushed straight back from her face and the kindly light in her dark eyes and her lively movements that were as unstudied as those of a bird. But beside Romana what was it that remained of her? What chance had that miniature darkness when overshadowed by the much more magnificent darkness of the notary's daughter? Felix, even while outwardly busied with a hundred small concerns, felt himself irresistibly forced to turn over the question.

An hour and more passed before Felix, commanding silence, announced that the throne was ready for its occupant. Table-cloths had meanwhile been spread upon the grass, and all sorts of delicacies had appeared out of the provision baskets for the cold luncheon, which the appetites of the company, sharpened by mountain air, were beginning loudly to demand. The miniature, greenish-yellow heads of the *Waldmeister* blossoms floated temptingly in a huge bowl of *Mai Trank* prepared by Felix himself after the most approved German recipe.

"Will your Majesty permit me?" and he stepped up to where Romana was shaking the last flower heads from her dress.

The rest of the company, grown suddenly silent from curiosity, looked expectantly toward them.

"Am I really to sit up there?" she asked, glancing rather askance at the flowery throne with its canopy

of hawthorn and its garlands of forget-me-nots and cowslips.

"There is no escaping the duties of your state," said Felix; and with the mock solemnity which was the only possible setting to a scene which hovered dangerously between the picturesque and the absurd, he handed her up the mossy step. Then, somewhat to her consternation, he dropped on one knee, holding towards her a cunningly plaited wreath of marsh marigolds.

"No one but a *Mai Königin* can crown herself! Here is your diadem, O Queen, and here your sceptre! I have taken all the thorns off it, so you need not fear to prick your royal fingers," and he handed her a flowering wand of hawthorn. Then, standing up and facing the little crowd:

"Behold your Queen Romana, whom we have chosen of our own free wills, and whose behests we swear to obey until the sun has set behind the hills. Long live Romana the First! Queen of the May!" And while, in answer to his signal, the hidden musicians broke out into a royal march, the forest echoed to the voices of the young men taking up Felix Weber's cry:

"Long live Romana the First!"

The young women did not shout nearly so loud; all, except Aniela, who at sight of Romana standing there with the crown of gold flowers on her black hair and the hawthorn sceptre in her hand, felt her heart swelling with pride. She had always said that her friend was the most beautiful person in the world, and now she was sure of it.

To Romana herself the moment was by no means one of unmixed enjoyment. To find herself in one instant the centre of so many glances, not by any means all friendly, was far more disconcerting than she had expected it to be. Without feeling quiet enough to analyse, she realised vaguely that it was the men's gaze that was, in general, more friendly than that of the women. She felt the glare of an eyeglass upon her, and caught sight of a certain would-be fashionable young widow critically examining her, and in the flurry of the moment the crown, which with a nervous laugh she was placing upon her own head, almost slipped from her fingers. For one instant the whole *Mayalis* appeared to her a piece of childish nonsense, which she would gladly have escaped by flinging her marigold crown to the ground and throwing away her hawthorn sceptre; but just then she met Aniela's devotedly admiring gaze, and with an abrupt consciousness of her own beauty the unwonted and almost fierce fit of shyness passed.

"What are your Majesty's orders?" demanded Felix Weber, bareheaded at the foot of the mossy throne.

Romana looked around her; was she expected to make a speech? She did not think her courage would quite suffice for that! Her eyes fell on the cold viands spread out so temptingly, and she felt that the difficulty was solved.

"Give me something to eat," she said decidedly, as amid a burst of approving laughter from her new subjects she took place on her flowery seat. The

first command of the May Queen was one which could not fail to be absolutely popular; and as the refreshments were vigorously attacked on all sides, every one felt that the ice of an unfamiliar situation had been successfully broken.

What the veteran pine trees that belted the rustic hall thought of all this display of bottles and plates and last year's summer frocks and hats that were *almost* quite fresh—having been retrimmed after the latest fashion-plates—and somewhat over-frizzled hair and somewhat over-powdered cheeks, and the whole of this naïve provincial gaiety, it would have been hard to say; but since to enjoy one's self was the object, and since every one seemed to be doing that, it really could not matter what the pine trees thought.

By the time that the *Mai Trank* had made its first fragrant round the spirits of the company showed a distinct increase of liveliness. Romana on her throne found herself surrounded by a troop of serving knights, each intent on bringing her the most delicate morsels from the board.

"The last orange of the season!" cried one, holding out a somewhat flabby-looking orange, displayed upon a broad docken leaf.

"The first strawberry of the season!" said another with a half-ripe wild strawberry between his fingers. "Surely your Majesty will not disdain it because of its colour! It is in the shadow of your throne that the poor thing has turned pale!"

"A slice of cake—your Majesty's favourite cake, the one my mother always bakes for you when you

visit us!" insisted a third, pushing his way between the others.

Romana looked rather indifferently at the proffered gifts.

"The orange is over-ripe and the strawberry is unripe," she said, while her glance returned to the scattered company on the grass. It would seem that the right serving knight was not at hand just now. Already, without her knowing it, she was looking for one particular face among the others. There he was over there, busily doing the honours of an entertainment of which he felt the responsible host. Just then he was refilling the glass of a fair-haired girl whose nimble fingers had found time —even while eating—to fabricate a wreath of the wonderful deep-blue mountain forget-me-nots, with which she was now deftly trimming her rather worn straw hat.

"But the cake! You cannot refuse the cake!" cried the most aggressive of the serving knights at the foot of the throne.

Romana looked at him with a certain irritation. He was an old acquaintance, Aniela's brother, in fact—the only one of the *jeunesse dorée* present with whom she was at all well acquainted, and as like Aniela as a brother can be to a sister. The same adjectives of small, dark, neat, bright, which so exactly described her, described him almost as accurately. Romana had always known that he admired her, but she had not yet thought of his admiration as at all different in its essence from that of Aniela. Now, for the first time, as he stood before her with

the plate of cake in his hand and his imploring dark eyes upturned to her face, it struck her that perhaps his admiration was, after all, different from Aniela's, and with this consciousness his close vicinity became all at once distinctly irksome.

"I have the right to give commands, have I not?" she inquired abruptly.

"The absolute right."

"And you have got to obey me?"

"Implicitly."

"Well, then, Pan Polinski, catch me that butterfly, please, that is flying over there, and I will eat the cake meanwhile."

Polinski's discomfited gaze followed the sulphur-coloured butterfly that was crossing the open space. To refuse would have been ignominy, and evidently there was no time to be lost. With a gesture of mingled despair and resolution the small youth precipitated himself in the direction in which the butterfly had just disappeared in the shadow of the forest.

"And mind you do not come back until you have him!" Romana called after him amid the laughter of the bystanders.

"And you," she continued, turning rather fiercely to the bearer of the orange, "are to bring me a new fan, mine is broken."

"A fan?" he stammered. "Here in the forest?"

"Yes, of course, in the forest. There are dozens of fans here, live ones, I mean, of course. Bring me the broadest leaf you can find to keep the sun off my face. On that condition alone will I eat your orange.

And as for the strawberry," turning to the next one, "if you want me to eat it, you must find some more to bear it company. A single strawberry does not tempt me."

Having thus successfully rid herself of the most aggressive of her attendants, Romana looked about her with heightened colour and shining eyes. Perhaps it was the *Mai Trank* whose spicy fire was coursing through her veins, or perhaps it was the yet more spicy forest air that did it; but, undoubtedly, she was warming to her rôle. All shyness was gone, and in its place had come a keen desire to taste of the power which belonged to her, if only in play and if only for one day. Her glance fell on the young widow with the aggressive eyeglass, whose glassy stare had been acting on her nerves like an irritant ever since she sat on her throne.

"Eyeglasses are forbidden in my kingdom. I confiscate them until sunset. Where is my master of the ceremonies?" and she looked round sharply and frowned as she discovered Felix Weber still busy with the fair-haired girl—or rather she with him.

'Will your Excellency take charge of Pani Morawska's eyeglass, please, and not give it up again until the sun is behind the mountains?"

There was a suppressed titter as the widow with a sour-sweet expression yielded up her beloved eyeglass, which she was known to cling to for reasons that were far more of a fashionable than of an optical nature.

"And what do I see over there? A wreath? A crown? I can permit no crown except my own!"

Romana's eyes were now fixed haughtily upon the fair-haired girl, whose side Felix Weber had but just left at her command.

"It is only a trimming," she protested with a most becoming pout.

"It is a crown," persisted Romana. "I see therein a treasonable act, a menace to my sovereignty; therefore, I call upon you to take off that crown and to throw it away."

The girl hesitated, looking glum. No doubt she knew that forget-me-nots were exactly the flower to suit her Gretchen plaits, and perhaps Romana knew it too. Her companions watched her, half sympathetically and half pleased with her dilemma.

"Is my power absolute or is it not?" asked Romana with rising colour.

"We promised to obey, you know," sighed some one beside the victim. "After all, it's only a game." And with a somewhat ill-tempered gesture Gretchen pulled the blue wreath off her hat and tossed it aside.

The women looked at each other and drew a long breath. What would be coming next? "Shall we all have to give up our flowers?" they asked themselves aghast, while the men smiled inwardly, "Who would have thought that we had elected such a tyrant?"

"Now would be the time to pay them back for all the ill-natured things I know that they have been saying about me," thought Romana, restlessly finger-

ing her hawthorn sceptre, while her eyes ran roun the circle. Then, just as each was thinking, "Is my turn next?" the May Queen rose suddenly fro her place.

"Tell them to play a waltz!" she said to Webe "It is time to open the ball!"

CHAPTER IV.

"COME, Aniela, I am tired of them all; let us get away by ourselves!"

It was half an hour later, and, breathless with the ceaseless movement—for a ballroom with a grassy floor, however picturesque to look upon, is not free of objections—Romana took hold of her friend's arm and pulled her into the shadow of the forest.

Here in the green shadow it was gratefully cool, and on the smooth carpet of pine needles walking was easy. For several minutes the girls went on in silence, while the sound of the fiddles behind them grew gradually fainter. It had been Romana's first experience of dancing, in the social sense of the word, and each one of the arms which within the last half hour had been laid round her waist seemed to have left a separate tremor behind it; each one by the mere nature of the common gesture had revealed to her more plainly that she was a woman, and had reminded her that, according to one of the old-fashioned theories, mocked at by her father, woman has been made for man. Each one, yes—but one among them far more plainly, far more loudly than the others. It was of this especial arm she was thinking and of its masterful gesture as she walked silent by the silent Aniela's side.

Presently they both stood still instinctively on

the edge of another of the clearings with which the forest abounded, and of which each seemed consecrated to some especial flower, for there were some that were golden with marsh marigolds and some white with overblown anemones. This one was so blue with forget-me-nots that it might have been a sheet of water in which the colour of the sky above was reflected. Without a word of consultation Romana sat down on the nearest tree stump, while Aniela crouched on the moss beside her.

"These forget-me-nots in Basia's hat must have come from here," remarked Romana.

"You were rather cruel to her," said Aniela a little reproachfully.

"I meant to be cruel, she was flirting too outrageously with Herr Weber."

"Ah?" Aniela looked up with startled eyes. "Do you think so? So that is why you called him away?"

"I have to watch over the morality of my subjects, have I not?" laughed Romana, biting off one of the tips of her hawthorn bough.

"But Pani Morawska! She must feel so uncomfortable without her eyeglass, poor thing!"

"Then she should learn to use it with more discretion."

Aniela hesitated before adding in a tone of deeper reproach:

"And Michal? You didn't want that butterfly a bit, really, and now poor Michal is running about in the sun only to please you; he would do anything to please you, Romana."

"That is very nice of him," said Romana, trying

not to laugh again, for fear of hurting Aniela's feelings.

"I never thought you would turn out such a tyrant, Romana!"

"Neither did I. One never knows what is in one until the opportunity comes."

"If I was a queen—a real queen, I mean—I think the one thing I would enjoy about it would be to make people happy."

"Oh, *you* are an angel, of course, but I am not. I would make them happy too, but in my own way and at my own time, and only those that bent to me, not those that stood up against me, oh, no, that never!" and she snapped off another piece of the hawthorn with her fingers.

"Who would dare to stand up against you?" asked a voice close at hand, as Felix Weber emerged from between the pine trunks.

"Every kingdom has its rebels, has it not?" remarked Romana, quickly recovering from the momentary surprise.

"We were talking of tyranny," said Aniela shyly, "and of its unkindness—"

"And its delights. Are you one of those incorrigibly angelic people who are unable to understand the charm of making people do what they don't want to do?"

"I have never tried it yet," said Felix, leaning his broad back against the broad trunk of a pine alongside. "I fancy the delights of tyranny would be spoiled for me by having to see cross or unhappy faces about me, and that is a thing which my consti-

tution will not stand. Do you imagine yours would?"

"Well, I haven't tried it either, but what I can very easily imagine is the delight of *feeling* one's power as tangibly as one feels the sceptre in one's hand. I can quite understand such people as Nero going mad over the mere sensation. Sometimes I think that I could have been a Semiramis, if I had lived at the right time."

"I fancy you are expecting too much of yourself," laughed Felix, unable to take his eyes off the figure of Romana, who with her flowery crown still on her head sat upright upon the tree stem. "A queen indeed," it echoed in his mind; "the other might be her slave."

"To be a Semiramis you would need to begin by being a heathen."

"I am a heathen."

"Oh, Romana!" murmured Aniela, aghast.

"Well, you can't call a person a Christian, can you, who never goes to church, and who when she hears the bells ring has to ask what feast is being celebrated?"

She looked up at him straight as she spoke, as though to see what effect her words were having.

"Are you not rather fond of talking in extremes?" he was beginning in some perplexity when Aniela broke in.

"Oh, don't listen to her. She is quite as good as any of us really, only her father has some strange ideas. Romana, had we not better gather some of those forget-me-nots?"

"That tallies with what I have been saying," said Felix, warned by the embarrassment of Aniela's manner that he was treading on delicate ground. "You would find it far harder to be a Semiramis in practice than in theory. No doubt you would rule with firmness—the examples we have had this afternoon convince me of that," and his brown eyes laughed outright.

"Perhaps you would be a Maria Theresia, but not a Semiramis and not a Catherine of Russia, you will not convince me of that."

Maria Theresia is too *bourgeois* for my taste; choose me some other model, please."

And again she glanced up at him where he stood with his back against the pine stem. Felix had not put on his hat all day, and the breeze had tossed about his wavy brown hair until it lay in picturesque disorder about his broad, white forehead. It was the moulding of the forehead, as well as that of the clean-shaven chin, which made the strong, young face handsome.

"Why does he look so happy?" Romana asked herself again. It had been her first question on catching sight of him that morning. She had never before seen anybody who seemed to enjoy existence —the mere, bare fact of existence, quite apart from its conditions—so obviously as did this young man. Was it the mere exuberance of perfect health, the mere consciousness of youthful vitality at its zenith which put that chronic eagerness into his eyes? Or had so many concrete causes of happiness crowded into his heart that they could not help looking out

of his eyes? The sight of that so undisguised gladness almost provoked Romana, and at the same time awoke her curiosity. Although she was far younger than he, and enjoyed her existence on the whole, she had already found out several grievances against fate. Had this ill-paid young engineer then discovered some antidote to all the ills of earth? The problem busied her mind, even while her lips went on taking their part in the half-serious, half-jocular discussion that had got under way.

Presently Aniela rose softly from her place on the ground. In the historical turn taken by the argument she was beginning to feel beyond her depth, for her education had been of a much more primitive sort than Romana's. Besides, she did not seem to be wanted here.

"I think I must get a few more of those forget-me-nots," she murmured as she moved off, almost unperceived by the talkers.

When she stood with the giant forget-me-nots almost up to her knees, as in a pool of water, Aniela wondered a little at finding their colour so much dimmer than it had seemed to her a little while ago. There was a weight upon her heart which had not been there this morning, and which she could not quite explain to herself. But enlightenment was coming—it was close at hand already—no farther off than the other side of the little meadow, where Aniela, her hands full of forget-me-nots, almost ran against another member of the party—a thin, long-nosed girl with eyes that were unpleasantly like

little black beads, and which, as well as her tongue, she knew how to put to excellent use.

On meeting her significant gaze Aniela stopped short; even before the other had opened her lips she knew that something unpleasant was coming.

"I would not have introduced those two," said Zosia Halinska, who had the merit of always going straight to the point.

"Which two?"

"As if you didn't know. Those two over there, of course. Any one can see what has happened to them. And your own affair was going all right until to-day. What *can* have put it into your head to bring Romana Morawek? You must have known, after all, that you are nothing beside her—we're all nothing beside her. You've spoiled the day for all of us, and perhaps your whole life for yourself."

"I don't know what you mean by my affair," said Aniela bravely, though she was scarlet up to and over her ears. But if all you want to say is that Herr Weber admires Romana, then I answer that if he did not he would need to have very bad taste. She is my best friend, and he—he is a friend too; and if they like each other—well, so much the better."

She said it with a little gulp, though without flinching.

"Oh, well, if you are pleased it is all right, of course; it is your affair, after all, and not mine;"

and with a laugh that did not sound over-charitable Zosia Halinska passed out of sight.

Looking after her, Aniela had to resist the temptation of sitting down on the ground and bursting into tears. She knew now what that weight on her heart meant. So she had not been wrong in her surmises, since others saw it too. "What has happened to those two?" Yes, it was as clear to her as it evidently was to Zosia; and it was her own doing. But although Aniela's body was small, her heart was stout, and, above all, loyal.

"It is only natural that he should find her more beautiful than me," she said aloud, brushing the forget-me-nots across her eyes in guise of a pocket-handkerchief. "Zosia is right when she says that I am nothing beside her; and if they are happy—*both* happy—what more can I want?"

"Perhaps to be happy myself," a small voice answered in her heart; but Aniela would not listen to it, being one of those women whose vocation it is to renounce, rather than to possess.

The morning drive had been a joy indeed, but it could not bear comparison to the homeward journey upon rafts, the dreamy floating down between the river banks in the waning sunlight with the accompanying ripple of green water and a constant succession of river pictures gliding gently past. Besides—for the bulk of the company—what endless opportunities for giggling and uttering little shrieks of alarm at the rapids or allowing one's self to be supported by a neighbour's arm at some particularly

sharp turn! Yes, even from the point of view of mere flirtation the rafts were decidedly superior to the carts.

Romana and Aniela were almost the only silent members of the company. With her fast-fading marigold crown still on her head—for the sun was not yet set—Romana sat in her place of honour, drinking in the breeze that played upon her face and watching the panorama from under her half-closed eyelids. She had discovered to-day that life was a quite different thing from what she had hitherto imagined, and yet she did not clearly account to herself what it was that had helped her to discover it. Felix Weber was by her side, and he also did not speak, and seemed to be gathering as many impressions as possible from the wonderful day that had passed.

"That is the end!" he said aloud and almost solemnly as at another turn of the river the sister towns—drowned in the white of their own orchards, from which the sunlit roofs emerged like islands from a sea—came into sight.

Romana heard the words beside her, and started back to a reality which she had almost forgotten. From among the orchards and over the roofs came the peal of the church bells, calling to evening service.

"Yes, it is the end," she said slowly, "and the close of my reign too. Look, the sun is almost gone! I suppose it is time to be putting on my hat;" and, pulling out the hairpins which had fastened it, she took the wreath from her head.

"May I keep it?" asked Felix Weber in a low voice beside her.

Romana felt the blood shoot to her cheek, and laughed to cover her embarrassment.

"What? All this yellow packet? It's too big for a buttonhole, surely. But wait, I will make a compromise. Sovereigns can distribute decorations, cannot they? and I am a sovereign still, since there is still a point of sunlight upon that roof, and my master of the ceremonies deserves a decoration for the success of the day; is that not so?" And she looked laughingly at Aniela and never noticed the constraint of the smile that answered her.

"Well, I herewith institute the Order of the Marsh Marigold, and you are the first bearer thereof;" and pulling a flower from the wreath, she held it towards him.

"It is not an order unless you fasten it yourself," said Weber without moving—"that is what sovereigns do." And with somewhat unsteady fingers she passed it through his buttonhole, then seizing wreath and sceptre, threw them far out into the river, just as the raft began to slacken pace before steering for the bank.

CHAPTER V.

If any one remained in doubt as to what had happened to Romana and Felix on the occasion of the *Mayalis,* Felix himself saw quite clearly in the matter. Perhaps he had never heard of a *coup de foudre,* used in the sentimental sense, but this could not prevent him knowing that he had been stuck by one. The sort of beatific mental collapse to which the victims of this particular sort of lightning-flash are generally reduced was, however, for him disturbed by a faint qualm of conscience, for even at the risk of alienating from him the reader's further interest, it is high time to confess that Felix, although something quite distinct from a saint, was an instinctively *good* young man, with no more complications about his character than has the average healthy youth, and few of those dark corners in his mind, whose very darkness tempts the psychologist to rummage. If a psychologist had, nevertheless, rummaged, his disappointment would probably have been woful, for instead of those choice morsels of human depravity, those hidden blossoms of vice which, like truffles, can only flourish underground, all he would have discovered would have been a lot of commonplace, primitive qualities—such as truthfulness, kindheartedness and loyalty—the worst he could have brought to light being a certain im-

patience of temper and rashness in action, which, disadvantageous as it may be to its possessor, is not generally coupled with very sinister qualities. Perhaps the most conspicuous of those things was what may be described as a sort of universal weakness towards his fellow-creatures, a general leaning towards them, which left him a little too open to even an unfounded pity, and which made that he would always rather see a person—any person, whether connected with himself or not—happy than unhappy, a smiling rather than a frowning face, and therefore to the best of his ability acted in a manner likely to produce these results. Happiness is said to breed happiness, just as gloom breeds gloom; could that be the explanation of that look of gladness in his bright young face, which had attracted and at the same time irritated Romana?

Perhaps because his forefathers had lived a simple and straightforward life, working more than they reflected, he had about him none of the marks of the age—neither its chronic discontent nor its rage for analysing and its craze for digging after ideas—even had he not been too busy earning his living and that of his widowed mother to have time for digging after anything but his daily bread. On the whole, this world seemed to him a very endurable place, whose arrangements he felt neither desire nor vocation to upset, though he would never tire of making it more endurable yet, both for himself and for others, by such harmless means as his twenty-five years and his overflowing high spirits suggested to him.

The qualities which made him so attractive to people in general and so welcome in Rostok as a leader of society were really the result of a happy mixture of race. A Pole is by nature superficial and impulsive, and a German pedantic and heavy; but mingle the two in the right proportions and you obtain a result that is distinctly charming; and in Felix matters were so happily arranged that on a solid basis of German steadiness and working capacity were grafted the more graceful address and that refreshing absence of self-consciousness which marks the true Pole.

If his Polish sensibility had been set aflame by the meeting with Romana, it was in his German heart that he felt the qualm aforenamed. During the six weeks that he had now been at Rostok he had almost made up his mind that Aniela Polinska was the right woman for him. He had come here with his eyes open, fully intending to make his mother happy by that settling down for life which she had dreamed of since he was twenty, and after a brief survey his preference had fallen on Aniela. But there was no hurry; his mother would be quite contented if he were engaged before the winter, and he himself felt no overwhelming desire to part prematurely with his liberty. Accordingly, his attentions to Aniela had borne no pressing character, and yet they had seemed to some people unmistakable. Had they appeared so to Aniela herself? That was the question which disturbed him in the midst of his new ecstasy of mind, but yet could not bid him pause. Indeed, to pause now was as little in his

power as it is in the power of a body which has lost its centre of gravity to keep itself from falling. The question of his mother's wishes, of the inexpediency of hurry, had vanished from his mind. Perhaps there had been no hurry before, but there was a hurry now; so great and pressing a hurry that, scarcely at home on the evening of the *Mayalis*, he began to plan another meeting. The problem was not quite simple, for Morawek was known to receive no visitors, and to send in his card to the motherless girl was out of the question. Having reconnoitred the premises—which he knew only superficially from a business visit paid to the notary's office quite lately—a ridiculously simple solution presented itself—the garden wall! Not that he meant to climb over it, though he had no objections to doing so if the necessity occurred, but that a moment's reflection convinced him that whoever walked in that garden (whose steep slope could be seen from the road) must inevitably stop to lean against that wall and look across the river. No doubt a conversation on this little-frequented road would bear a semi-clandestine character, but Felix was beyond thinking of anything but the joy of looking into the black eyes which had taken him prisoner. All impulses with him were prompt and vigorous, and in a nature as morally unspoiled and as physically healthy as his it was unavoidable that the impulse of love should be of the elementary order which brooks neither obstacles nor delay.

His calculations proved so correct that only four days after the *Mayalis* he found Romana with her

arms on the top of the wall and her face towards the sunset, exactly as he had expected to find her. There was no one on the road just now, although a few minutes before a troop of church-goers had passed that way. Now the bell calling to the *Mai Andacht* was still, and in the garden nothing moved except the birds, who were making quite an unnecessary twitter and flutter among the lilac bushes before settling to rest, somewhat like excited children who know that it is bed-time and yet cannot make up their minds to have done with the delights of the day.

Romana started a little on hearing herself addressed; and seeing who it was who had spoken her name, she flushed hotly.

"Are you at Lyczyn? I thought you were at the other side of the water," which, had he been calm enough to notice, might have acquainted him with the fact that, at least, he had not been quite absent from her thoughts.

"Yes; I came over to inquire how you feel since your abdication; whether the cares of your office have left no traces behind them?"

"Only for that?" she said, lowering her eyes before a glance which awoke in her a sudden sense of flurry and beginning with her bare fingers to play with the little bits of loose mortar on the top of the wall, and which were still warm to the touch from having been broiled all day in the sun.

"Only for that. But I am answered already. Your eyes have not grown dimmer since last Monday, nor your lips paler."

Romana said nothing, but went on crumbling the mortar between her fingers.

"Since he has got his answer, I suppose he will be going now," she reflected. But he showed no signs of going.

"You have a wonderful spectacle here," he remarked, throwing a glance towards the sunset picture; and this wall is as good as a theatre box. I suppose you often spend your evenings here?"

"Very often."

"And this road is generally empty, it seems to me."

In Romana's downcast eyes a spark flashed up; she was beginning to understand his drift.

"Oh, not always empty," she said demurely. "A few minutes ago more than a dozen people passed this way, going to the church, and they will pass back again presently when the service is over."

It was the first real encounter she was having as a woman with a man, yet she was aware of no difficulty in the situation. The arms came as readily to her hand as they come to the hand of every woman who is typical of her sex, and she knew how to use them as unhesitatingly and infallibly as the untaught kitten knows how to use its claws, or the infant snail its horns.

"Oh," said Felix, looking a little vindictively in the direction of the church. "But at least you don't go to those evening services yourself?"

"I never go to any services at all. Don't you remember my telling you that I was a heathen?"

He looked at her differently now—gravely and inquiringly—a glance she was quite able to meet.

"Yes; but I did not quite know how to take that."

"Take it *au pied de la lettre.* I belong to none of your religious creeds."

She said it with almost unnecessary distinctness, keeping her eyes upon his face. For some reason or other she felt that she could not be at her ease with him until he understood her position clearly—knew the worst about her, so to say.

He could not, indeed he did not try to conceal a little trouble in his eyes. To a man with so deeply rooted a respect for established things the information could not fail to be rather serious.

"You can't help belonging to one if you have been baptised."

"That was before I had anything to say in the matter, or perhaps I should say before my father thought of saying anything in the matter."

"And your mother is dead, of course?"

"Yes; but why do you say of course?"

"Because no mother would allow her child to grow up without believing in a God."

"Do *you* believe in a God yourself?"

"Of course I do!" he said with an almost indignant astonishment. "Have I not got a mother?"

"That is true," and again her eyes sank before his, though without the flurry of a minute ago, rather with a new sense of some great deficiency which she guessed at rather than recognised.

"And you do not?"

"I? No; how can I when everything proves the contrary?"

"What do you call everything?"

"What my father has taught me—and the books."

"Oh, those books!" said Felix between his teeth with a spark almost of hatred in his hazel eyes. Books had for him the very mediocre attraction which they have for most men of action rather than of reflection, and the books of the age (or what he knew of them) positively repulsed him as directly antagonistic to his nature. That the notary should have dared to put them into his daughter's hands would have been enough to condemn him in Felix's eyes, even without the recollection of certain circumstances connected with his late visit to the office.

Romana was assiduously crumbling the mortar between her fingers.

"Tell me one thing, Herr Weber. *Why* do you take for granted that there must be a God?"

With somewhat puzzled eyes Felix looked round him at the mountain landscape, as though with some idea of finding his argument there, but quickly recognising that he was not expert enough for this method, he tried a simpler one.

"Why? Well, because it seems to me that we *need* one," he replied with a half laugh.

"As if we got everything that we need!" Romana's folded arms were on the wall now, while with fixed eyes she gazed across the river. The argument was almost the one she had used sometimes in controversy with her father, and perhaps for this very reason not to her taste.

"Then, if you are just like the others, why are you not with the others now, over there in the

church, where they are burning candles and shrieking out hymns?"

He laughed outright now.

"Oh, that is a different thing! To believe that one's existence has got an author does not necessarily imply a liking for shrieked out hymns. Besides, I like being here best," he added, looking up suddenly into her face and again with that glance that made her heart beat.

It occurred to Romana that the conversation had taken an unnecessarily serious turn.

"Oh, it is nice enough here, but not so nice as in the woods. Have you got no more German customs in reserve? Couldn't you invent a *Junalis* as well as a *Mayalis?*"

They both laughed, looking irresistibly into each other's eyes.

"I believe I could if I thought long enough. It's not want of ideas I suffer from, but want of time. I myself shall have my fill of the woods soon—that long-talked-of road to Rodna is to be started at last, and I am to superintend it—but it will be with a compass in one hand and a foot-rule in the other."

"You are going away?" asked Romana a little quicker than she had meant to.

"Alas, yes—for some weeks."

"How tiresome! Then we shall have no *Junalis.*"

"None that I can arrange—unless I get out of the job, and that wouldn't be easy, for the contract is signed."

"Then get out of it!" said Romana without reflecting.

"Don't tempt me! I'm an awful fellow for doing things in a hurry and being sorry for it afterwards."

"You would be sorry to have obliged me?" she asked with a glance far more fiery than she knew.

He flushed just perceptibly, drawing his under lip between his square white teeth.

"I would kill myself to oblige you, but—it is my mother. You see this work brings me in the very sum which I know she requires."

"Oh, I beg your pardon!" murmured Romana, bending her hot face down towards the wall.

Felix himself, though obviously troubled, was far the least confused of the two.

"I know I should reproach myself all summer," he said with a quickly repressed sigh. "And I can assure you that my fits of self-reproach are no joke. I do the thing thoroughly when I am about it. I can remember when I was five years old spending the night in tears because I had thrown a wooden dog with a broken leg into the fire. I could not bear to see him with three legs, and had thought to put an end to his sufferings and mine by sticking him into the oven, but when it was explained to me that only a little glue would have been required to make him whole again, I thought my heart must certainly burst with remorse. I've repeated the story of the wooden dog several times in the course of my life, but I don't want to do so again if I can help it."

"Which means that you are going away. When?"

"Not before I have seen you again, at any rate. Do you think it likely that there will be a good sunset to-morrow?"

They looked at each other again and laughed.

"It is not improbable; but whether I will be looking at it is another question. Oh, there they are coming back!" she added, glancing up the road. "I declare they are finished with their hymns already!"

"Then where is it to be?" he asked quickly. Decidedly this road was not so convenient as he had fancied.

"Is it to be?" Romana had almost said, but did not speak it. It seemed so clear to herself as well as to him that it must be.

"I was thinking of going to see Aniela to-morrow," she remarked, looking again across the water.

A cloud passed over the brightness of Felix's face.

"Could you not go and see some one else? I know almost everybody both at Lyczyn and at Rostok."

"But I don't; and, besides, papa doesn't like me to pay visits, except to Aniela."

"Well, so be it," said Felix in haste. "It is true that I owe a visit there, and perhaps we can consult as to the possibility of an excursion; it may not be too late even after I come back from the mountains." And having made this somewhat lame effort at saving appearances, Felix raised his hat and walked on, just as the first woman with a prayer-book in her hand reached the corner of the garden wall.

CHAPTER VI.

FOR the last ten days the temperature had been steadily rising until it had attained a height which was more like July than May. "It can't last," every one had said, and yet it had lasted without a break since the evening on which Romana had, for the first time, taken up her post at the garden wall. To-day, however, this premature magnificence showed signs of a collapse. No definite cloud-bank had yet gathered, but to the west the bright blue of the sky shaded off to a sort of leaden pallor, that was slowly but infallibly spreading, while the mountains, which for a week past had seemed to be retreating behind the blue haze of heat, appeared to have abruptly approached the town, showing that peculiar distinctness of outline and detail which generally comes before rain.

"I fancy our branches will keep fresh a long time this year," said Aniela to her brother as she handed him up another bough. "They're going to get a good soaking, at any rate."

Michal, upon a ladder propped against the house wall, was occupied in smoking cigarettes and fastening branches of birch and oak along the eaves of the wooden roof, for this was the eve of Pentecost, the "green festival," which turns a Polish country town into a sort of evergreen bower. Beside Aniela

there lay a heap more of freshly cut branches, for the leafy fringe was far from complete, and Michal not working with the zest which he usually displayed at these tasks. Aniela herself, greatly to her own distress, missed the sense of pleasure which the occasion had hitherto brought with it. Not further back than last year she had stood at the foot of this same ladder and handed up the branches to Michal with so light a heart; and yet here she was doing the same thing, but without the same delight; and there was Michal, so silent, even moody, over the work which he had loved as well as she. What had come to them both? Aniela knew it only too well, and she knew also that it was the same thing which had happened to them both, and, furthermore, that it had happened on the day of the *Mayalis*. For the recognition of how matters stood between Felix and Romana had been to Aniela more than a personal disappointment, it had been the shattering of a double dream. If she had allowed herself to think of being happy with Felix some day, she had, and with far greater confidence, imagined that her friend and her brother—both so tenderly loved—were going to be equally happy together. It was a thought to which the wish undoubtedly bore parentage, and yet until the *Mayalis* there had seemed no reason to relinquish the vision; for although Romana went on treating Michal exactly as she had done since the time when they all three did not measure ten feet between them—that is, as a sexless playmate—yet, undoubtedly, it had been as a playmate whom she enjoyed playing with. Until the *Mayalis*—ah,

yes; but since the *Mayalis* everything was changed, and for them both! And, therefore, it was that Aniela, having made the remark about the weather, went on handing up the branches silently, while Michal took them as silently and stuck them into their places without seeming to mind whether they stayed there or not, gnawing the while at the end of his cigarette, which had gone out without his noticing it. The two faces which in their habitual brightness of expression were so like each other showed a marked difference now. Faces which are planned by Nature with a view to cheeriness and alertness never can look their best under mental depression, and yet Aniela came far better out of the ordeal than Michal. Although the flash of her white teeth and the sparkle of her dark eyes were awanting, she only looked a little less pretty when serious than when gay, whereas Michal apparently could not cease smiling without beginning to scowl.

Presently Aniela's fat mother came bearing down upon them—a matron of vast proportions and inexhaustible amiability, but very little reasoning power discoverable. It had been said of her by one of the wits of Rostok that Madame Polinska possessed just enough brains to prevent decomposition; and to whoever viewed that expanse of flabby flesh and met the gaze of those goggle eyes it certainly appeared as though the morsel of brain tissue necessary for existence must be as hopelessly lost in its surroundings as is the proverbial needle in the haystack.

She came now to view the decorations and to wonder at their slow progress, also to observe that

it was very hot. But she evidently had something else to say as well, and after a pause of deep reflection she said it:

"I wonder what we have done to offend Herr Weber!"

"Why?" asked Aniela, stooping a little lower over the heap of branches.

"Because he hasn't been here for a week now, and before that he used to come almost every second day."

"Another branch!" said Michal sharply; "this one won't stick."

Just then they all turned their heads, for the little garden gate had grated. Almost immediately Felix became visible between the branches.

"Oh, then we haven't done anything to offend him!" murmured Madame Polinska, flushing a rich violet from sheer delight.

Michal paused, half turned round on the ladder, and a light of astonishment began to show through the ill humour in his eyes. With scarlet cheeks Aniela stood upright and held a branch towards the ladder. She was quite as astonished as Michal and—just in the first moment—almost as hopeful.

"What can this mean? Have we been mistaken, after all?" said the swift glance exchanged between brother and sister; and ere she knew it Aniela's impulsive little heart had given a big thump of joy.

Felix drew near, not very quickly. He had come here with a not quite easy conscience, and—but that it appeared his last chance of seeing Romana before his departure—would have preferred not to come

at all. To have found her here would have simplified matters, but the first scrutinising glance had showed him that she was not in the group. It was that glance which stirred the doubt in Aniela's mind —it was so obviously looking for something.

"I am so glad you are not offended," beamed Madame Polinska, extending her enormous hand long before Felix had got near enough to take it.

"Who has been offending me? You, Madame Polinska? Then it must have been in your secret thoughts, for I have noticed neither injurious words nor actions!"

He felt aware that he was speaking almost too jauntily for so ordinary an occasion as an afternoon visit, but could see no other way of carrying off the situation.

"We are ready to make amends, even for our thoughts," said Michal from the top of the ladder, flinging far his cold cigarette, and for the first time to-day his teeth flashed out in a genuine smile. Evidently he had decided on a favourable explanation of the incident.

"Do you think it is going to rain?" asked Felix, turning to Madame Polinska the moment he had got through his greeting with Aniela and having carefully avoided to read whatever there might possibly be written on her face. As he asked the question he looked at the sky and then quickly up the street.

"Well, every one says it is going to rain," pronounced Madame Polinska after another pause of

reflection. "I am sure it would do the rose-bushes good," and she beamed upon the nearest one, on which the swelling buds were already coated with dust.

"But surely not at once?" said Felix, looking still towards what he could see of the street.

"Anyway, we had better hurry up with the roof," said Michal quite cheerily now. "Here, Weber, lend a hand, will you?"

They had been working for several minutes when the gate creaked again.

Neither Michal nor his mother heard it this time, but both Felix and Aniela did, for the reason that they were both listening; and before looking round Aniela swiftly and instinctively glanced at his face. She had not yet seen Romana hurriedly approaching along the shaded path, when already she guessed that she must be there. In the same instant she heard her friend's voice, and then only she quite understood.

"I have come," Romana was saying rather breathlessly, "but I don't know whether I shall not have to go back again immediately. I believe there is a thunder-storm coming, and I haven't even brought umbrellas for myself and Roza"—and she indicated the sturdy servant-girl who acted as body-guard. "But as I hadn't seen you for so long I thought I would just make the attempt—but really it is too stupid about the umbrellas."

She was speaking far more rapidly than was her wont and kept her attention too carefully concen-

trated on Aniela alone. The hurried walk in the sultry air had brought no more than a faint streak of colour to her exquisitely pale cheeks and had slightly uncoiled the little black curls which clung so closely to her temples that they might have been lines drawn in ink upon the marble whiteness of the skin.

"We can lend you umbrellas," said Aniela softly; and as the two girls drew back from their mutual embrace she looked deep and earnestly into her friend's eyes, still keeping Romana's gloved hand in hers. "You couldn't go back, at any rate, without resting. You must have walked very fast."

"I was afraid of the weather, you see,—there! What is that?"

They all stood still, listening—no doubt about it—that was neither the roll of a carriage on the bridge nor the unloading of a cartful of stones—that was thunder, and bringing with it that peculiar thrill which the first thunder-clap of the season always does bring with it, just as does the first snow.

"It may not be coming this way," said Felix.

"Let's go to the watch-tower and see what's up—it's impossible to judge from here;" and Michal, who had made the suggestion, climbed down the ladder as nimbly as a squirrel and brushed off the bits of twigs that hung about his coat. His expression had again changed since Romana's appearance on the scene, not to the moody expression of a few minutes ago, but to a mixture of alarm and suspicion, which sent his eyes moving with lightning-like rapidity backwards and forwards between the faces of Ro-

mana, Felix, and his sister, and which made his smile—for he was still smiling—not altogether pleasant to see.

"Come into the house and wait till it is over," urged Madame Polinska, who greatly objected to getting wet, perhaps because there was so much of her to dry. "It's far safer than going away over there."

"But there may be nothing coming—that is just what we want to convince ourselves of," said Felix, hurrying after the others. He knew that the chances of getting a few words with Romana in the little box of a drawing-room inside were as good as *nil.*

Beyond the space—half shrubbery and half orchard—which surrounded the house there was a long, narrow strip of ground free of trees and planted with potatoes. A narrow foot-path, evidently grudgingly saved from the potato plot, ran down one side close to the wooden paling, beyond which lay the neighbour's garden. The moment they had reached the open ground almost every one made some exclamation.

"This looks serious," said Felix, glancing with evident dissatisfaction at the sky.

Among the trees they had naturally remained unaware of the big preparations that were being made overhead. The mere fact that the sun still continued to shine had had an unconsciously reassuring effect, but out here it became at once evident that the king of day was at his last gasp. Even before they reached the two-storied wooden summer-house, which went by the name of the

"watch-tower," standing at the end of the garden and overhanging the very bank of the river, the leaden pallor had crept close, and abruptly the shadows of both trees and plants—the shadows of the walkers themselves hurrying on in front of them as they walked single file upon the narrow path—lost their sharpness, then faded away into the universal dulness.

It was from the upper story of the "watch-tower" that the real view was to be had; and, as though irresistibly drawn by the spectacle that was preparing itself, the four young people passed up the narrow wooden staircase on to the covered platform above. From here they could look straight down into the green current of the Keremosz and across to Lyczyn, whose houses crowded down to the water's edge, just as did those of Rostok. But what they looked at chiefly now was the sky, all alive and moving with the space of clear blue still visible to the east, across which the black and the white clouds were flying like smoke, the white ones looking more mischievous than the black ones—yet most mischievous of all, the copper-coloured embankments which had gathered to the west, seeming with their compact masses to weigh down the mountains themselves.

"Certainly there is something coming," said Felix, speaking as though against the grain.

"Something big," said Michal. "Look at the birds!"

As they hurried along the path they had been aware of an accompanying flutter of wings, which

now only they saw to proceed from a flight of swallows, shooting backwards and forwards in the air and alighting every now and then upon the branches of the fruit trees in the neighbouring garden. A big pear tree, evidently the favourite, was one flutter of wings, its branches weighed down beneath the living freight as heavily as with fruits in autumn.

"I noticed them shooting about while I was on the ladder, but I fancied it was seeing me so near their nests that made them nervous."

"And those other birds," said Romana; "look! Are they not sea-birds? That means a flood."

The pair of white-winged, black-tailed birds now skimming the water were well known at Rostok and Lyczyn; and whether they were sea-gulls or not, as the popular belief held, there could be no doubt that their appearance always portended something unusual in the way of bad weather.

"Really I think I ought to be going before there is any danger to the bridge."

Romana said it with a look almost of apology towards Felix, who was resting his hands on the balustrade beside her. On the other side of her Michal had taken his place, in order, it would seem, to keep a close lookout upon the smallest movements of his neighbours.

"There could not possibly be any danger to the bridge before to-morrow," said Felix decisively; "take an engineer's word for that." And despite Michal's vicinity, he could not forbear turning a glance of entreaty upon her. "And, besides, although something is coming, it isn't sure that it's

coming at once. These preliminaries generally take much longer than the performance itself. The air is not moving yet, anyway."

Aniela, who had been standing silent beside her brother, now turned rather abruptly towards him.

"Perhaps we may have time to finish the roof, after all, Michal; there are not many branches awanting. Had we not better go and try?"

"Too late," said Michal, not moving from his position.

"No; it is not too late, unless you make it so. Come, Michal, quick!" she urged with that brisk decision of manner which the gentle Aniela knew how to assume at moments when she had some special object in view. The reason why she spoke so decisively now was that she had just fought a battle with herself and gained it. Nothing could be clearer than that Felix and Romana wished and hoped for a few minutes' *tête-à-tête*. Knowing of Felix's impending departure and having put two and two together, she had arrived at the conclusion that this was a tacit *rendez-vous*. The choice of the spot seemed to her unnecessarily cruel, and that was why there had been that battle to fight, which ended in the invitation to Michal.

"Won't Weber come too?" he asked with a sulky glance at Felix, who appeared not to have heard the suggestion.

"No, no; we can do alone; give me your hand down the staircase!"

CHAPTER VII.

It was not until Romana heard the descending steps upon the wooden staircase that she realised that she and Felix were alone. She had been telling him of the last time that she had seen the sea-birds and of the flood that followed, but now she abruptly stopped talking, and for a minute there was one of those ominous silences which, if they last beyond a certain time, can only be broken in one way. It was Romana who spoke first, partly in order to be done with the silence and partly because there was a question weighing in her mind. Her voice was a little shy as she asked:

"Tell me the truth, Herr Weber, were you very much shocked at what I told you the other day?"

"About what?"

"About churches and—religion in general. By rights you ought to have been shocked, you know."

He uttered a half laugh. Perhaps I would have been if I quite believed all you told me."

"Then you suppose that I was joking or—posing?" she asked, drawing her black brows together.

"No, I don't. You made that amazing statement quite honestly, only you repeated it rather too much like a lesson. Those wonderful opinions may be quite genuine, but they are not *your* opinions, they are those of your father grafted onto you. As yet

you have seen everything through your father's eyes. Wait till you come to look through your own, and perhaps you will make discoveries."

"I hope not," she said, a little abashed by the earnestness of his tone.

"And I hope yes."

"Why?"

"Because I observe that women without religion are generally unhappy."

"And men not?"

"I don't say that, but—we are different altogether," said Felix, who belonged to that not uncommon order of men who, although possessing a firm hold upon the rudiments of faith, remain of opinion that religion, or at least its outward form, has been invented for women alone. "You require to be taught to use your own eyes, and I know some one who could teach you."

"Who is that?"

"My mother," he said with so strange a vibration in his voice that Romana, fearing she knew not what, moved a step away from the parapet she had been leaning on. After hesitating for a moment she sat down on one of the garden chairs that stood about.

"I can't imagine why the storm that is coming excites me so to-day," she said as she passed over her damp forehead the cambric handkerchief which she had nervously squeezed into a ball. "Usually I delight in storms, but to-day I feel as frightened as those swallows over there—it's too ridiculous! I can't stay longer, my father would never forgive

me if I let myself be cut off by the river. You can't imagine how suddenly that bridge goes sometimes, and what absurd things happen when Lyczyn and Rostok are separated over night. Once an unhappy Rostok Jew had left a cartload of fish on the Lyczyn side, and sat for three days on the bank, gazing across the water and tearing out his hair by handfuls at the thought of how they were spoiling uselessly over there. They say his relations watched him for fear of his trying to swim across. And once a Lyczyn bride had to take off her wedding dress again, because the Rostok bridegroom had no means of getting across."

"And did his relatives not have to watch him too?" asked Felix, laughing.

He had turned his back upon the view in order to face her.

"I don't know—I fancy he wasn't so desperate as the Jew. It was the parents that wanted the marriage—I don't think they cared for each other very much," said Romana thoughtfully. "If they had it would have been dreadful to have that raging torrent between them!" and she shuddered nervously. "Sometimes for five days it is impossible to get across, even in a boat."

"Yes, that would be dreadful," said Felix as he plunged his eyes into hers.

Romana got up from the chair uneasily.

"Not yet," he pleaded. "We came here to consult about another *Mayalis,* did we not?—only with another name and we have not even begun to consult yet."

"When are you coming back again?" was Romana's reply, given with that sort of abstracted air that seems to imply that the lips have spoken more or less of their own accord without a formal consent of the will.

"Not before the end of July, I fear."

"That is a long time," she said, still with those dreamily abstracted eyes.

"If I might dare to hope that it will appear as long to you as it will to me," began Felix, and then abruptly paused.

He had come here without any fixed intention of risking his happiness by a premature declaration, wishing only to carry away with him to the mountains the very latest and freshest impression of Romana. But he had not reckoned with the influences of the moment, nor of her near vicinity, nor of this unexpected *tête-à-tête,* nor either with the brewing storm, which on his nerves as well as hers seemed to be wreaking its will. It appeared to him as though the sultry air had hands and was holding him by the throat, while the electricity with which the atmosphere was laden seemed to be shooting through his veins in a succession of tiny shocks. All at once it struck him as preposterous that he should go away for two months without at least knowing whether there was any hope for him at the end of his banishment; for if there was none, then surely it were better to employ the banishment itself in effacing the image, instead of dwelling upon its lines; in tearing out the plant that was growing so alarmingly fast, instead of hanging over it and tend-

ing it. Even in the midst of his profound agitation his German common-sense showed him that, and while this thought and many others jostled themselves in his mind he heard his own voice saying, but so thickly that he scarcely knew it for his own:

"Romana—it is no use! I cannot go away like this! I know it is too early to speak, and probably you have no answer for me yet, but tell me only this: Is it already time for me to begin to despair?"

Romana, startled beyond all measure, stood opposite to him immovable, her black eyes unveiled and fixed in consternation upon his face. It was not what he said which surprised her so much—indeed, after the last few minutes it would have surprised her almost more if he had not said something of the sort—but the way in which he said it, the breaks in his voice, the unsteadiness of his lips. She had not yet collected her thoughts, far less spoken, when again the wooden staircase creaked—loudly this time—and Michal Polinski, breathing fast and with drops of perspiration on his forehead, unexpectedly appeared. Neither Romana nor Felix had had leisure to observe the figure which, a minute before, had come hurrying along in the shadow of the paling. Both gazed at him now in astonishment, for his disordered hair and panting breath gave him a touch of wildness, which sat incongruously upon the small, neat figure, generally as precise as though fresh from a turning lathe.

"You are wanted, Weber," he said, speaking in short sentences that seemed to be hacked from each

other. "There is a place on the top of the porch which I cannot reach. You are taller,—please go! Aniela is waiting and my mother also."

"A place on the top of the porch?" repeated Felix, so completely taken aback as in the first moment to be unable even to understand what was being talked about.

"Yes—the branches, you know. We want to get done before the rain begins. There is no time to lose. Aniela is waiting."

"Oh, very well," said Felix, having thrown one desperate glance towards Romana. Clearly there was no escape from this. It would be better to do whatever was expected of him quickly and to hope for a second chance. With this thought in his mind he ran down the staircase so fast that Romana saw him flying along the pathway before she had quite realised that he was going.

"I must say good-by to your mamma," she said, moving towards the entrance; but already Michal had sprung forward, barring her passage.

"No, no! You do not go now!" he said, almost incoherent in his excitement. "You do not go after him—it is my turn now! I have suffered enough this afternoon. If it had not been for that idea about the porch!"—and he laughed like an hysterical girl. "There is no branch wanted at all, you know, but I had to get away from Aniela somehow. Aniela, poor Aniela! Don't you see that you are breaking her heart—and mine as well?"

"Aniela's heart?" repeated Romana, staring back

at him in genuine bewilderment. "Aniela's *heart?* What are you talking about? What have I done to Aniela?"

"As if you did not know! You have taken away from her that big, fair-haired engineer, whom she has set her fancy on. I hate him, but I want her to have him all the same."

"I don't understand, I can't believe! You mean to say that Aniela *cares* for Herr Weber?"

"Look at her when he is talking to you, and you will see. He was like a tame cat in the house until that unlucky *Mayalis*—any one could see what his intentions were. But I'll break his head, all the same, even if he *is* twice my size"—snarled out the little man in a fresh access of spite. "He's made Aniela ridiculous and he's made me unhappy. Oh, Romana, how cruel you are! Don't you see what I am suffering?"

His words were drowned in a loud clap overhead, under whose shock the wooden summer-house trembled to its base.

"Oh, I must go, I must go!" cried Romana, seized by a double terror, and pushing past him resolutely, she hurried down the steps and set off—running along the path beside the potatoes without even daring to look back. She was a little frightened of the thunder, but Michal with his rolling eyes and white lips frightened her still more.

In front of the house the rest of the company were awaiting them anxiously.

"I must go, I must go at once!" panted Romana,

pressing her hands to her palpitating breast. "Where is Roza? And an umbrella? I can have an umbrella, can I not?"

"May I go with you?" said Felix in her ear, as Aniela ran into the house to get what was required.

"Impossible!" she whispered back, decisively shaking her head. She knew well that, according to Rostok and Lyczyn etiquette, his escort would be an enormity, but it was not that she was thinking of so much at the moment as the necessity of getting away from the overpowering emotions of the afternoon. Michal's disclosures had surprised and disturbed her to a degree which made a little collecting of thoughts necessary. Only then would she be able to decide what his statements were worth. It was for this reason too, quite as much as because of the thunder, that she hurried over her departure, saying little to Aniela and turning a deaf ear to Madame Polinska's urgent invitation to stop here until the storm was over.

Felix, his arms on the top of the paling, was gazing after the figure fast disappearing down the street, when he became aware of somebody beside him. Aniela and her mother had gone into the house to see to the window fastenings, but Michal, close by, was looking at him so significantly and with so unpleasant a twitch at the corners of his discoloured lips that Felix instinctively inquired:

"What is it?"

"Ask Aniela what it is," said Michal, and there was the same boyish insolence in the tone as in the glance. "She can tell you better than I."

"I do not think that I have anything to ask your sister."

"Haven't you? A little time ago you had, though —or if you had not, then you've been playing a game that doesn't hurt *you* perhaps, but which hurts *her* a good deal, I can tell you."

"You cannot have the right to speak of your sister in this manner," said Felix, wincing, nevertheless, as though the words had been a lash.

Michal did not seem to hear him. His lips had twitched into a disagreeable smile.

"You are an adept at the game, I have no doubt, but other people can be adepts too. You think perhaps that because you've been given a yellow flower and been talked to over a wall" (where had the boy ferreted out those items?) "your cause is gained already? Take my advice, and don't believe it in too great a hurry. You've spoken to her three times, and I've known her since she was three years old; which of us two knows more about her, do you think? She's half a Roumanian, and every Roumanian is as ready to catch fire as dry straw— we know that down here well enough; but dry straw doesn't burn long, and almost any one who likes can set it in a blaze."

"You seem to know a lot about it," said Felix, who after only a second's deliberation had decided to take the matter from the light rather than the serious side. As he looked into the face opposite him, so youthful in its outline, so dark—almost sinister—in its expression, he could not help saying to himself with a sort of puzzled amusement that

this was something like a child playing at the passions of a grown-up man. The words he had just heard did not seriously disturb him, the motive from which they sprung was too obvious for that; it was the reference to Aniela alone with which his mind was uneasily occupied. This was exactly what he had feared. If this excited boy spoke true, then he had hurt her after all—hurt her badly—and to a man whose vocation in life it was to dispense pleasure, and not pain, this thought was peculiarly antipathetic.

CHAPTER VIII.

ROMANA walked so fast that she got across the bridge before a single drop had fallen and before the heavy stillness of the air had been disturbed; but just as she turned into the long street that was the backbone of Lyczyn, and at the far end of which stood her father's house, the dust was suddenly whirled to the roofs, and a crash of broken glass, calculated to strike terror into faint hearts, signalled the opening of the storm. The clattering fragments were carried along the pavement as easily as though they were dead leaves. Almost at every window there was a face, housewives watching their neighbours' windows being broken—for the crash of glass has something positively exhilarating about it so long as you are quite sure of your own windows being fastened. A dozen hats were flying down the street, pursued by their bareheaded owners; everything that could flap was flapping wildly—coat-tails, ribbons, shawl ends. Everything that could rattle was rattling—loudest of all the tin ensign above the inn door. In two minutes the wind had swept the street clear of hats and owners alike. The first big drops splashed down before Romana like large, dark spots upon the pavement; then suddenly she felt a welcome coolness upon her hot face and at the same time Roza pulling her by the sleeve. In another moment she was standing under an open

doorway, huddled together with various other refugees, for what could an umbrella avail against the sheets of rain that broke upon the roofs with a sound so thunderous as to be scarcely distinguishable from the real thunder pealing overhead? A pot of red carnations on the ledge of a window opposite was hastily taken in; a pair of horses stood at the inn door, abandoned by the driver, who had taken shelter inside. Romana noticed these details almost unconsciously, her mind occupied the while not with the storm, but with the experiences of the afternoon. She scarcely knew what that harder sound was which superseded the rush of the rain until some one beside her said: "There is the hail!" The shaggy little horses were the only living things in the street now; immovable they stood with meekly lowered heads, patient targets for the vicious hailstones.

"Does it hurt much, I wonder?" Romana said to herself, and together with the compassion she felt for the horses there somehow got mixed up a pang of compassion for Aniela; for if Michal was not talking nonsense, and if Aniela really loved Herr Weber, then surely a great disappointment was in store for her! Felix's interrupted declaration had been quite explicit enough even for Romana's inexperience. Just in the first moment Michal's wild words had put doubts into her mind, but she had only to recall Felix's look, the tone in which he had spoken, to be reassured. That her happiness might have to be bought at the price of Aniela's was unkind of fate, but could not alter the main fact. So hard

were these two feelings—compassion for her friend and joy for herself—pulling her in two directions that Roza found it necessary again to pluck her by the sleeve in order to call her attention to the lull which had come in the storm.

By the number of people who appeared abruptly out of all sorts of doorways—out of the hairdresser's, the grocer's, the chemist's—it was easy to see how the end must have been looked for. The carter reappeared, jerking himself into his sheepskin coat, and the horses raised their dejected heads; even the carnation pot was again put out upon the ledge in order to enjoy the welcome freshness. "Is this to be all?" Romana asked herself as the sun broke for a moment through the clouds, making the wet street shine from end to end; but the metallic glare that still hung over the mountains seemed to answer that this was not all.

Either it was the brisk walk in the freshened atmosphere or else the natural development of things which made that by the time Romana reached home the joy in her heart had succeeded in almost entirely smothering the compassion. "It is me he loves! It is me he loves!" her spirit cried exultingly. Love is essentially egotistical. Was she to refrain from rejoicing because her friend might possibly be mourning—a supposition which, after all, might turn out to be quite unfounded? Romana, at any rate, decided to regard it as such until further proof came; and having come to this conclusion, felt at liberty to let her imagination go a little.

What would be *his* next step now? Surely he

would do something before starting for the mountains! Would he write or try and see her? Perhaps speak to her father? With the thought a new series of questions opened: What would her father say? Would he make difficulties? Perhaps he would find her too young to think of marrying yet? To speak the word even in her mind made her cheeks burn with an astonished alarm. But they could wait, if that was all. And what possible objection could her father have to Felix, who, after all, had a fixed position, and who would not be taking her out of his sight? On the whole, although she knew that his ideas were different from those of other people, and despite the somewhat distant awe with which—in spite of daily intercourse—he always inspired her, the prospect seemed to her full of hope.

That evening as she sat at the supper-table there was such an unwonted brilliancy about her beauty that Morawek's attention was perforce arrested.

"Your wetting does not seem to have done you much harm," he said, drawing his shaggy brows together as he looked at his daughter across the table. "It was a rattling good shower, though. I had the outer office crammed full of people, who couldn't get away in time—the whole Stromicz family, pestering my life out of me about that marriage contract. It seems to me that half Lyczyn is marrying; I've been doing nothing but draw up marriage contracts for a month past; it's the usual symptom of the season."

"How many marriage contracts you must have

drawn up in your life!" laughed Romana with unusual lightheartedness; and then the curiosity which had been pressing upon her during the last hours prompted her to add in a tone at once nervous and tentative:

"By the time you come to draw up my marriage contract you will have had plenty of practice, at any rate."

The glance from under the shaggy eyebrows grew keener.

"No doubt, since I can count upon three or four more years' practice before then."

"Three or four years!" repeated Romana in a tone which in itself was a betrayal. "But I am nearly seventeen, papa, and lots of girls marry long before they are twenty."

"Girls with foolish parents, perhaps, or girls with big chances; but at Lyczyn there are no chances."

The ineffable contempt with which the words were spoken put a flame into Romana's eyes as she answered unhesitatingly:

"What do I want a big chance for? The principal thing is to be happy."

Thomasz Morawek said nothing immediately, though for a moment or two he forget to put the morsel on his fork into his mouth. For the second time this evening his daughter had astonished him, and so completely this time as to turn his thoughts abruptly in a new and very unwelcome direction. A few days ago one of the notabilities of Lyczyn having some business in the office, had thought to please the notary, to whom he was entrusting a

rather delicate affair, by paying him a compliment upon his daughter's looks, and had added with one of those comprehensive smiles which may mean a lot of things:

"Since that *Mayalis* all our young men have become useless. She has turned every head in Rostok as well as in Lyczyn, I hear."

At the time the remark had not seriously disturbed the notary; but coming back to his mind now, and taken in conjunction with Romana's last words, as well as with the unusual brilliancy of her eyes, it gained a new and ominous significance. It really almost seemed as though there lay some danger in the air, and already his mind was occupied with the best means of meeting it. While he silently resumed his supper, cutting up his ham with what looked like perfect equanimity, he was in reality coming to a momentous resolution. He had thought it would be time to speak when the moment of the great metamorphosis was actually come, but his mind was too wide and too elastic not quickly to fit itself into a new set of circumstances. Romana should be informed of her real social worth before the thought of throwing herself away upon some provincial bumpkin had had time to take root. The daughter of a millionaire who knows herself to be the daughter of a millionaire is not so likely to make a *faux pas* as one who thinks herself merely the daughter of a country notary.

"Certainly the principal thing is to be happy," he repeated, speaking slowly and looking about carefully for his words, for he knew enough of his

daughter's individuality to consider prudence advisable; "but that is exactly why it is foolish of girls to marry in a hurry, or rather of parents to allow them to do so. It's the best means of missing happiness that I know,—a real, solid happiness that rests on some surer foundation than a mutual fancy of two young people who know nothing of life."

"What do you call a solid happiness?" asked Romana in a tone almost of resentment.

Morawek laid aside his napkin, and reaching for his stick, stood up.

"Come, and I will show you," he said, making a step towards the door. Then as Romana in her astonishment remained sitting:

"Come," he repeated, "I am not joking;" and with a vibration in his voice which she had never before noticed he added: "Come, Romana, I am going to tell you the secret of my life."

Perplexed and disturbed, Romana followed him across the passage and through the two outer offices, in each of which a clerk was still hard at work. Grim and naked spaces these—furnished only with big deal writing tables, a few chairs of unpainted wood, rows of pigeon-holes along the whitewashed walls, a few cloak-pegs, and with rough floors, on which peasant boots had left marks of fresh mud. The mingled odour of garlic and of cheap tobacco with which the atmosphere was still impregnated forced Romana to put her handkerchief to her face as she hurried through into the notary's private office beyond, the sanctuary into which only notabilities were admitted. No signs of luxury here either;

a better writing table and better pigeon-holes and chiefly a better atmosphere. Instead of the deal chairs a broad sofa covered with waxcloth, and instead of the cloak-pegs an iron safe in the corner, which, unadorned though it was, at once impressed the visitor as being the soul of the apartment.

"Sit down," said Morawek, pointing to the sofa with a somewhat ceremonious gesture, as though he were doing the honours of his office to his daughter. "I shall begin by showing and then I shall explain."

Taking a key from his watch-chain, he hobbled towards the safe. Romana, sitting in state upon the slippery sofa, was astonished to see how—just before putting the key to the lock—he sat down suddenly upon the nearest chair, as though overcome by some momentary faintness.

"You are ill, papa!" she said, rising quickly; but he waived her back impatiently to her place. In another moment he had turned the key in the lock, and bending down with some difficulty, because of his stiff leg, began to take out, one after the other, five or six parcels of most formidable looking papers. As he came back towards her with these in his hand she could see that his face looked a little bleached under the dark skin.

"No, I am not ill," he said with a curiously uncertain smile in answer to her inquiring look; "but this is an important moment for me, Romana, one I have looked forward to for years; and it moves me to think that it has come already—sooner than

I had expected. Look at these papers! Do you know what they are?"

Romana took the packet held towards her and read upon the topmost paper: *"Osterreichische Kronenrente."* The rest of the packet had the same inscription, only with different numbers.

"Some sort of shares, I suppose," she said, not at all comprehending yet what her father wanted.

"And these?"

"Something of the same sort, I suppose. But I don't understand why—"

"Wait, wait, you will understand in a minute. Look at these railway shares—the Franz Josef Bahn—all above their nominal value; and these *Ungarische Gold Rente,* I've had them a fortnight only, and no risk, mind you—none of your brilliant experiments! Nothing but the guaranteed Government papers, bearing low percentage, it is true, but safe—oh, yes, quite safe!"

He had hobbled back to the safe once or twice during the last minutes, and now, with his stick crooked over his arm, as was his habit when he wanted both hands free, was engaged in ranging the carefully ticketed bundles upon the table before him. Although it had not been for its own sake that he had begun to accumulate money, yet he had ended by feeling capable of loving it for itself alone. His big hands as they passed over the crisp papers now were almost caressing in their touch.

"No risk—no risk whatever!" he murmured as he put a paper straight here or carefully smoothed

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out a dog-ear there, and for the moment oblivious of Romana's presence.

"But what does it all mean?" she asked, still amazed.

Morawek looked towards the door. "It means that I have got nine hundred and sixty thousand florins shut up in that old safe—they or their equivalent in papers. It means that I am a rich man, Romana, and on the eve of becoming a millionaire. There now! I have taken your breath away at last, have I? You were not prepared for that, were you?" and he laughed an almost childlike laugh, shaking his grizzled mane back from his broad forehead.

Strong men with hobbies are apt in the moments when they are exhibiting them to look like weak men, and Morawek—in the emotion of what he recognised as a turning-point in his daughter's life as well as in his own—lost his self-control so far that his hands actually shook, but not so far as to forget to lower his voice for fear of the ears of the clerks.

"Nine hundred and sixty thousand florins!" Romana said after him, and the astonishment on her face must have satisfied her father. "But where does it all come from?"

"From out there," said the notary, pointing with his thumb over his shoulder towards the door they had come in by, and still in that cautiously modulated tone.

Romana thought of those dreary, garlic-scented rooms and felt that, after all, she understood nothing of life. Was it upon those mud-stained floors that a million had sprouted?

She said no word while Morawek, regretfully gathering the packets together, limped back to the safe and stowed them in their places. As yet she was only wondering to herself why, if her father was so rich, she could not have as many frocks as she liked and why there need ever be any bother about the butcher's bill?

When he came back to her she saw at once that the momentary weakness which had made him appear so unfamiliar was passed.

"You wanted to know what I meant by a solid basis of happiness," he said, speaking now in his usual incisive tone; "well, there it is. Freedom from all material anxiety, deliverance from all the small worries of life, a wide margin for physical and mental enjoyment—those are the things that make happy marriages, believe me, and not any passing movement of either fondness or passion. Almost every case of divorce I have had to do with in these last thirty years has been the result of a so-called love-match."

Romana passed the back of her hand across her forehead. She had not recovered enough from her surprise to follow up the inference of her father's last words.

"But, papa, what do we want all that money for? We live so quietly."

"If we had not lived so quietly the million would not be so near its completion. You wouldn't have me spend my money at Lyczyn, would you? At Lyczyn! . . . Ha, ha!"

"But where, then, papa?"

He came a little nearer to the sofa.

"At Vienna, Romana; at Vienna, in the heart of civilisation. I have decided upon the very *Bezirk* in which we shall live. Since I can pay almost what I like for house rent, I can take my choice of lodgings, you know—unless I decide to buy a house. Oh, child, child, there is a glorious time coming for us both, I tell you! Just think of the theatres, of the exhibitions, and of how you'll be able to pick and choose your dresses and your hats—and your husband too, for the matter of that!"

He was launched now on the full tide of his dreams, and stumping up and down the bit of floor before the sofa, lost himself in a glowing and burning picture of that future in the capital which he had settled almost into its details. Romana heard about lectures at the university, about scientific experiments witnessed, about the supreme delights of a *Prater Fahrt* in the long row of brilliant equipages, among which he promised her her carriage should not be the least brilliant. She got an outline of the characteristics of each of the eight theatres of the capital, which could in truth not have been more correct if given by an *habitué;* she was posted up in all the projected street improvements, and even was given a list of the most fashionable milliners and the most unimpeachable confectioners, and all this with the irresistible impulse, the shining eyes of a man who sees visions. The map itself was brought out in order to show her why that particular district of the town would be the most convenient as residence. As she listened, open-eyed and with

lips apart, she could not quite escape the contagion of her father's excitement, nor was the excitement diminished by the fact that—although she had not yet arrived at analysing the situation—she already felt the danger to her new-born hopes which it contained. Beyond that remark about her being able to pick and choose a husband, her father had not touched upon the part assigned to her in the dream of the future, and yet she understood enough to foresee a struggle. All that talk of the milliners and of the drives in the *Prater* were so many baits offered her—this also she felt and at moments had almost cried out: "No, no; it is not those things I want! That is not the basis of *my* happiness!" But that would have been to open the struggle at once, and what was she to struggle for before Felix had told her in so many plain words that he desired her for his wife? First, she must be clear with him before she could face her father. Therefore, it was that while Morawek talked to her as eagerly, as rapturously as he had talked to his fellow-student twenty-five years ago in the Jesuiten Garten at Lemberg, Romana said scarcely a word, but watched him and wondered what was to come of it all. The perplexity on her face passed so well for astonishment, and the astonishment appeared to Morawek so natural under the circumstances, that—standing still again before the sofa—he actually felt moved to ask her:

"Will you be able to wait two years more, Romana? It won't take quite two years to get the million full. Can you wait, or will Lyczyn appear

unbearable after the picture I have just drawn for you?"

He seemed almost to be pleading for those two years he needed as with his short-fingered, clumsy hand he gave her one of those unwonted caresses which had so very little that was caressing about them. He himself was beginning to be a little afraid of what those two years might bring to her, and yet the thought of leaving the million just short of completion was too bitter to be faced.

Romana looked into her father's eyes, and for a moment she thought again that she was going to burst out with the truth, yet she controlled herself enough to say with an effort:

"No, no, Lyczyn is not unbearable—not unbearable at all!" and then quickly rose from the sofa.

"Going to bed? Yes, I suppose it is time for you, and I have some work to finish. The harder I work, you know, the quicker the million will be full," and the smile he gave her was meant to be one of mutual comprehension. Perhaps it was because she did not smile back, or perhaps it had been something in the tone of her last words which caused him to add with sudden gravity just before she reached the door:

"Remember, Romana, that million will be yours some day—unless, of course, you should do anything foolish."

"What do you call foolish?"

"To marry against my wishes, for instance."

This time she said nothing, but turning the handle quickly, went out.

CHAPTER IX.

In the middle of the night Romana awoke suddenly, knowing that something had disturbed her, but not recognising the cause until a fresh thunderclap shook the room. The storm had come on again with a renewed force, to which yesterday's outburst had been but a preliminary, as Romana—listening to the rush of rain upon the roof and to the noisy gurgling of the water-pipe beneath her window—was forced to acknowledge.

"The bridge!" was her first thought as her consciousness cleared. "Will it hold till morning?" The idea of being abruptly deprived of all communication with Rostok was fraught with terrors of which she had been quite free on previous similar occasions. The lightning flashes which every now and again put the dark room into a glare would have made the idea of going to sleep again appear almost unfeasible, even without the troubling thoughts which sprang up to confront her in the same moment that her eyes opened—a perfect mob of thoughts, jostling each other and struggling with each other, and into which it was imperious to bring some order.

Despite the emotions of yesterday, she had fallen asleep so quickly as to have no time for examining the situation in its new light—the light thrown on

it by her father's revelation. To say that the discovery of this unsuspected fortune left her indifferent would be to say that she possessed none of the attributes of humanity in general and of feminine nature in particular. Money, even to a girl who has never bothered about it, means a lot of charming—though possibly—indefinite things, and it would be false to say that Romana had not felt something like a watering of the mouth as the panorama of delights pictured by her father passed before her mind's eye; a watering of the mouth and at the same time a pant of regret, for almost simultaneously with the discovery of her fortune had come the conviction that it would probably have to be renounced. "Unless, for instance," you marry against my wish," he had said, and he was quite capable of holding to his words. Whatever else was not yet clear to her, the certainty of her father opposing her marriage with Felix Weber seemed to her to stand fast. In no way that she could see could Felix fit into those ambitious dreams to which she had been given the clue last night.

But the pang of regret, though it had been genuine of its kind, had been quickly submerged by another sort of thrill and by a thought that was half proud and half exultant.

"It is for *him* that I shall lose it all! He cannot doubt that I love him if I give up everything—if I even break with my father for his sake!"

And whereas a minute ago she had been saying to herself that the million was useless to her, since she was to forfeit it, she now rejoiced that she had

found a use for it—that of sacrificing it for her lover's sake.

"He will have to love me—he will have to love me very much indeed when he sees what I can do for him!" The second thought followed inevitably upon the first, for Romana belonged to that class of women who desire not only to love, but also to be loved—one of those open-handed natures who give largely, but require the same measure in return.

Surely next morning would bring some sign? And she fell to listening with strained attention to the rush of the rain and to attempting to calculate the volume of water by which the river must already be swollen.

"I never believed that bridge could interest me so much," was her last conscious thought as amid the faint echo of the thunder rolling away in the distance she fell asleep again.

When she awoke it was daylight—a grey, sunless daylight, which seemed as though weighed down towards the floor by some oppression from above. But that unbroken swish of rain which had pursued her into her dreams was gone, and the noisy water-spouts had ceased their chattering.

With the thought of the bridge she had fallen asleep, and with the thought of the bridge she woke up again. From her window she could not gain a full view of the river; so having dressed hastily, she went out into the dripping garden. On the threshold she was greeted by a deep, rushing sound—a sort of subdued roar, which she knew well—the voice of the Keremosz when it goes wild—and be-

tween the bushes she could catch glimpses of its turbid waters, rolling much nearer than usual, almost close at hand. It was not raining now, and the air was immovable, but around her the devastation of the storm was apparent. The steep paths showed marks of the miniature torrents which had poured down them during the night, washing the gravel away at places to pack it close in others. The overblown lilacs drooped heavily, as though tired with being buffeted, and some peonies—"Pentecost Roses"—which had bloomed just in time to justify their appellation—lay with their heads on the ground, their scattered, purplish petals making pools that might have been of congealed blood. From every leaf and flower the water dripped heavily and continuously with a secret, whispering sound, outroared by the river outside. At a turn of the path Romana almost stepped upon a nest that had been blown from a neighbouring tree, and in which four unfledged birds were helplessly opening their bright yellow bills. Despite her hurry, she could not but stop and take it gently in her hands—for although the sympathy between Romana and her fellow-creatures might not always be perfect, that between her and the dumb portion of creation—that portion which could neither oppose her nor challenge her—was ever lively.

"I must get a ladder afterwards and put them back on the tree," she said to herself as she reached the low wall and strained her eyes in the direction of the bridge.

Her heart gave a leap of delight, for the bridge

still stood, but whether it would stand over the day was, at the very least, a question. Although the rain had ceased, the volume of water was evidently increasing with every minute, fed by the reinforcements from the hills, which only now were beginning to reach the town. No more than a narrow strip of shingle separated the river from the road beneath the wall, and with every instant the waves lapped a little nearer, as though greedy of each mouthful of earth. On the other bank people could be seen standing about in agitated groups or armed with boat-hooks and busily fishing up the logs that were beginning to float past. The fact that those people wore their best clothes—a fact which they themselves had evidently forgotten in the contagious excitement of their present chase—reminded Romana that this was Sunday, and not an ordinary Sunday either—as did also the sight of the green branches on the neighbours' roofs, of which the storm had already made a ragged fringe. The church bells clanging out under the low, grey sky had about them a pressing sound as of some signal of alarm, which added to the scene an element almost of terror.

There was a touch on Romana's arm; Roza was beside her with the morning post, or rather with the one letter which it had brought to her address. Only one letter, but *the* letter! She was sure of it in the moment that her eyes had fallen upon the free and masculine, but unfamiliar, hand.

"It is well," she said, trembling with the impatience of Roza's presence, and then turned and

fled up the nearest path into the house and into her own room—the treasure tightly clasped in her hand. It was with locked door, with beating heart and heaving breast that she read her first love letter; for although it asked only a question, and that not the momentous one, it was undoubtedly a love letter, and written probably before she had quite reached home on the previous evening.

"ROMANA! Since we parted I have been breaking my head and torturing my heart with wondering what your answer would have been if we had not been interrupted this afternoon. I cannot go away to the mountains without that answer. Tell me where and how I am to get it. May I come and fetch it myself? When? I await your commands.

"FELIX WEBER."

For several minutes Romana sat considering. There were two things which she could do now: one was to go straight to her father with the letter in her hand and tell him everything. Having contemplated this idea for a moment, she rejected it. Before engaging in a battle of so momentous a nature it seemed to her imperative that Felix should be initiated into the exact state of affairs, and that could only be if she were able to speak to him alone. Therefore, she decided for the other thing to do, and—the advisability of losing no time having just presented itself to her mind—rising in a sudden hurry, she approached her writing-table. Yesterday's post had got across the river, and the forenoon's post might be expected to get across too, but as to the afternoon all was uncertainty. Her hand

shook a little as she selected a pen, but in her heart a voice like a bird's seemed to be singing:

"I knew it! I knew it! He was not able to wait!"

Confronted with the blank sheet there came the difficulty of the beginning. To call him "Herr Weber" seemed to her, at least, as impossible as to address him as "Felix." Decidedly the simplest thing was to leave that part out; so scrawling only the date, she wrote with feverishly agile fingers:

"Yes, you may come and fetch your answer yourself. The garden wall is the only place I can think of—unless the road is flooded. In this weather people are sure to take the upper road to church. Whatever you do, do not go to my father until you have spoken to me, there is something important you must know.

"ROMANA MORAWEK."

She breathed deeply, leaning back, the pen still between her fingers and a smile softly parting her lips. She was picturing to herself his face as he read the note which brought him his happiness. All at once the smile was extinguished. She had seen another face—that of Aniela—and she was putting to herself another question: What would the news of this mean to Aniela? And Michal? This time she frowned and bit the end of her penholder; then, having considered for a moment longer, drew a second sheet towards her. It would be better to let Michal know once for all that there was nothing for him to hope; it would prepare him for the blow and would spare her all danger of a repetition of

that distasteful scene of yesterday. She dipped her pen in the ink, still frowning, for again there was the difficulty of beginning. She had called Aniela's brother by his Christian name since her childhood, but to-day—and more particularly after yesterday—she could not bring herself to write "Dear Michal," while "Pan Polinski" would only make him laugh. Oh, well, the same solution must just do for this letter as for the other; there was no spare time, at any rate, for hunting out another.

"It is best to be frank, even at the risk of hurting you," she began straight off; "and to tell you at once that this can go no further, since I cannot feel for you anything more than friendship. I fear you will be disappointed; and if by any word or look of mine I have awakened in you a false impression, I hope you will forgive me. For the future we can be no more than acquaintances.

"ROMANA MORAWEK."

Romana had scarcely folded the two notes into their envelopes when a vigorous assault was made upon the locked door.

"Pani! Pani!" Roza's voice was heard outside. "The water is almost over the wall! Oh, it is dreadful!"

"And the bird's nest!" it flew through Romana's mind. "It was on the wall that I left it, oh, poor little wretches! Perhaps I shall still be in time!"

Snatching up a shawl, she ran out at the heels of the excited Roza and stopped breathless only at the foot of the garden.

The nest was still upon the wall. Roza's description had, after all, been a little too highly coloured.

In it were the four open yellow mouths and hovering near were the anxious parent birds. Having put them into a place of safety, Romana returned irresistibly to the wall; even without Roza's embroidery of the truth the change of scene since half an hour ago was almost inconceivable. The dull, swollen current which then had not yet touched the road, now washed the foot of the wall. Like an unbeautiful sea, it stretched from the lower houses of Lyczyn to those of Rostok, and already upon its broad mud-coloured breast the signs of ruin were beginning to be visible. It was no longer single logs that drifted past, but fragments of rafts, bits of paling, bundles of straw. One whole raft came along with nothing on it but a sheepskin coat and an axe stuck into a log end. Next the willow basket-work of a cart, looking like a huge cradle; the wooden seat which belonged to it bobbed after it in a great hurry, as though in hopes of catching up with it yet. At every moment there was something new to look at, and the uncertainty of what the next moment might bring added inevitably to the fascination of the wild, fearsome spectacle. The whole population of both towns seemed to have collected at the river's edge and to be racing the current with boat-hooks for the choicest morsels of wood. The church bells were still ringing, but no one seemed to heed them now.

"I must just see if that tree goes," Romana said to herself as she watched a huge acacia in full flower on the farther bank, which with every instant was leaning nearer to the water.

Strange, indeed, it is to think upon how small an issue the fate of a life may sometimes hang. It is not too much to say that if the roots of that acacia tree had been a little less tenacious or the current a degree stronger, the whole course of Romana's future would probably have been changed. While she watched with a fascination that was almost like hypnotism how the beautiful tree bent its flowery head lower and ever a little lower, she could not know what was happening in the room which she had left ten minutes ago.

CHAPTER X.

THE morning post which had brought a letter to Romana had brought various business missives as well as newspapers to the notary; and this being a day which, because of the greatness of the feast, was one of enforced idleness, he had found himself at leisure to plunge immediately into his favourite reading. While Romana was opening Felix's note her father was tearing the band off the *Neue Freie Presse,* and while she was penning her answer it so happened that Morawek's eye alighted on a paragraph in which some proposed innovation in one of the most important Vienna streets was discussed. Such paragraphs he never missed, jealously following every phase in the development of what he regarded as his future home; and as he now attentively read, his massive head nodded in approval.

"Yes, yes," he commented aloud, "that would be a step. Away with those musty old churches! I have said that all along. Upon my word, if they carry out the plan fast enough, that's the very street I shall pick out for our quarters. I must tell Romana about this, it will help to keep up her interest."

And with the *Neue Freie Presse* in his hand he hobbled over to the other side of the house.

"I have found a new residence for us," he began as he opened the door without knocking, and then

stopped short on seeing that the room was unoccupied.

"She can't be far," he thought as he came in, shutting the door behind him and looking round him at the evidences of a recent presence—the unmade bed, the little slippers lying anyhow on the floor, for Roza was far too much occupied with the flood to have had time to give her attention to the room yet. The only comparatively comfortable chair was beside the little writing-table by the window, and towards it Morawek limped, making it groan beneath him as he let himself heavily down. While he did so his quick eye fell upon two addressed envelopes lying side by side on the table before him. He dropped his stick in his astonishment, for they both bore masculine names. Having picked it up again, which he did with his usual deliberation, the notary, with that same deliberation of gesture, took up one envelope after the other. They both held their contents already, but were both still open; and seeing this, Morawek did what it is to be supposed that nine fathers out of ten would do under the circumstances—he took out the two notes and read them very carefully one after the other. The situation was quite peculiar enough to justify an apparent breach of discretion, even if Morawek happened to be troubled with scruples—which he was not.

Having read the two notes through, he laid them down before him, each beside its respective envelope, and unhooking the stick from his arm, where he had put it to be out of the way, planted it before

him with his two hands crossed upon its top—his favourite attitude when in deep thought. Although any person entering the room at this moment would have seen nothing remarkable about his look (facial expression had for him become too much a matter of routine for that), he was in reality for the first time in his life bearing the full brunt of absolute consternation. During a quarter of a century of notary's work he had looked closely into the moral anatomy of many families, into their faults and their misfortunes, without having once felt seriously moved. To-day, for the first time, his own family life was touched, and the sensation was one which, despite his impassible countenance, came near to unnerving him. The danger which he had scarcely begun to suspect was close at hand, at his door already, it would seem; for little though he knew of love affairs "from the inside," he had in the course of his work seen plenty of them from the outside, and could not fail to recognise the symptoms of the case. The answer that was to be personally fetched,—the garden wall,—it was clear enough in all faith, and clear also was the allusion to the important communication to be made. It meant nothing less than that the bait he had held out last night was not going to be taken, was going to be rejected in favour of that hare-brained mixture of sentiment and delirium called Love!

And for whom? Morawek, moving for the first time after several minutes, took up the envelope again and scanned the address more carefully. "Weber, Engineer." What! . . . that man! And

the mighty forehead grew rugged with folds as the shaggy eyebrows contracted. He remembered him perfectly now, although he had only seen him once, on the occasion of Felix's solitary visit to the office some weeks back. The object of that visit had been the ratification of the very contract which was now calling him to the mountains; and if the meeting had remained a distasteful memory to Felix, the impression upon Morawek had been at least as unfavourable.

As he now sat before his daughter's writing-table, fallen again into his former rigid attitude, he was diligently recalling the conversation which had taken place in the office, an incident which he had dismissed as irrelevant then, but which now grew up suddenly into timely significance.

Generally it was not his habit to waste time in desultory conversation with his clients, but on this occasion the paper just signed before him happened so well to fall in with his own views that in laying down the pen he allowed himself to be carried away to the remark:

"A good job done! I scarcely thought I should live to see the Rodna people humanised!"

"I fancy they are very human already," said Felix with his ready smile; "or do you, perhaps, take them for angels because they live so near the sky?"

"I take them for brutes, neither more nor less."

"For what earthly reason?"

"For the reason that they live in a wilderness,

cut off from all communication with even such civilisation as Lyczyn affords, their intellect on a level with that of their own oxen, their habits not much more refined than that of their own swine—"

"And their enjoyment of life perhaps equal to that of the happy birds that sing on the top of their own pine trees."

Morawek looked hard at the young man.

"Does that mean that you find the lot of those peasants enviable?" he asked coldly.

"More enviable certainly than that of their equals in poverty in one of your big towns. Their horizon may not be wide, but it is well filled up, and with a lot of things—their mountains, their sheep, their little scraps of field, and principally with the brown domes of their little wooden churches. I have been employed in the mountains before; and if you ask me where I have met the most contented men with their lot, I should answer 'there.' It seems to me that whoever has work and faith cannot be very unhappy."

Morawek turned towards the contractor, who had just put his signature to the same paper which bore that of Felix, and who now stood by, an indifferent listener to the discussion.

"I congratulate you on the progressive ideas of the gentleman to whom you have given your confidence," he remarked with bitter incisiveness.

Felix laughed good-humouredly.

"Oh, I know I shouldn't say it, since it is I who am building the road which is to bring them the 'bless-

ings' of civilisation; but if I were given to scruples, I can assure you that from what I have seen of those blessings I might be tempted to tear up that paper on the table and to leave them to the company of their oxen and their eagles. As it is, I am not at all clear in my mind as to whether I am conferring on them a boon or a curse."

"I fear my next client is waiting," Morawek said at this juncture, principally because he felt on the point of losing his temper; and that was about all that had passed.

This, then, was the man who loved Romana and whom Romana loved! This hopeless Philistine, this narrow-minded reactionist, who had not blushed to mention religion as a condition of human happiness! No; this man, whose views were so intrinsically repugnant to his own, should never be his son-in-law; to this anti-progressist Romana should never be allowed to sacrifice herself in what could be no more than a movement of romantic exaltation. They must be separated,—but how? How with the least pain to her? Probably she would suffer a little, for now that he had fully recalled Felix Weber's image, even Morawek's animosity was forced to acknowledge that there were certain personal advantages about the man calculated to inflame a maiden fancy; but a little suffering was better than a lifelong regret. He said this to himself quite honestly, believing that in rescuing her from Felix Weber he would not only be preserving his own dream intact—for, as he now recognised to his own astonishment, the dream could no longer

be whole if Romana was not in it—but also preserving her from a fate which must end by crushing her.

Yes, but how to do it? By sitting here until she came back and having it out with her immediately? That was one way, but surely the most brutal and the least diplomatic. It might come to that yet, seeing that he had been here for ten minutes already and that at every moment the door might open. He would not shrink from the contest if forced upon him, but he knew his daughter too well not to prefer a mode of attack less calculated to arouse her innate spirit of contradiction.

"Something must be done, and done immediately," he reflected. "Quick action alone can save the situation. Let me see, there must be some other way," and with an elbow on the table he pressed one hand to his forehead, as though forcibly to concentrate his thoughts, while with the other he again took up one note after the other.

Scarcely a minute had passed when his hand dropped from his forehead, and he said to himself: "I have it!"

The boldness of the idea which had visited him actually sent a wave of dark colour up to his bearded face. "Yes, that way it might do; it is worth trying, at any rate."

Without a moment's further hesitation he took the note intended for Michal and pushed it into the envelope addressed to Felix, placing the one written to Felix under Michal's address. Then

quickly moistening the gum of each envelope, he closed them both and replaced them side by side in the exact position in which he had found them.

"She will never remember whether she closed them or not," he reflected as, rising briskly, he hobbled to the door.

* * * * * * *

He had not been back in his office for many minutes when the tree which Romana had been watching toppled over and majestically sailed away upon the current, like a flowery green and white island. At the same time there was a crack as of a pistol shot from across the water.

"What was that?" she asked of Roza, who was running from end to end of the garden, exchanging items of news with the domestics of the two neighbouring houses.

"That's a support of the bridge, but Jusia says it will hold all day yet, unless more rain comes."

"And my letters!" thought Romana. "Good gracious, what am I doing here?"

"Come, Roza, you are to take some letters to the post immediately," she added, as she turned towards the house.

The room showed no sign of having been disturbed since she left it; the slippers still lay on the floor just where she had kicked them off, and the two notes were side by side upon the writing-table, also just as she had left them.

"Wait till I close them," said Romana to the waiting Roza, who was nothing loth to gain half an hour's outing on so exciting a day. "Oh, I have shut them already, I see. Here are the stamps.

Now quick, Roza, quick, before the post goes!" and she thrust them into her hands.

The post-office was on the inland side, at some distance from the river, which did not suit Roza so well, as all the interest and most of the population were concentrated on the river-bank to-day. This made her walk all the quicker in the hope of saving a few minutes for a private excursion—so quickly that at the corner of the deserted street she almost ran against her master, who, quite against his usual habit, was taking a forenoon stroll.

"Ah, that's right," he said sharply, "you're the very person I want. Here are fifty kreutzers; I want tobacco No. 2; now get along quickly."

"But I have to go to the post-office, and the *Traffik* is quite on the other side—"

"I'm going to the post-office myself; give me the letters." And he took them from her unresisting hands, placing the fifty kreutzers there instead. "Now, hurry up and don't stand gaping."

"All the better," thought Roza as she prepared to comply, for the *Traffik* was in a much more interesting quarter.

She had made two steps away when the notary called her back.

"If your mistress should ask you whether you posted the letters yourself," he said curtly, fixing his hard gaze upon the girl's face, "you will answer Yes. Do you understand?"

"Yes," said Roza, understanding nothing, but trembling as she always did when she felt the master's eye upon her.

For one moment Morawek thought of bribing her, but rejected the idea as superfluous and even, perhaps, dangerous. He knew that she was too frightened of him not to obey blindly, whereas a florin as hush money might awaken suspicions, even in Roza's dense brain.

There was a dim smile dawning about the corners of his wide mouth as he watched her out of sight. "My calculations generally fall in," he was saying to himself.

When Roza was round the corner he calmly pocketed the note which bore Michal Polinski's address, pending its destruction at home, and in its place took out a second note bearing the same address in his own handwriting, and on which the ink was barely dry. A very brief reflection had shown him the advisability of staving off an explanation with Michal, whom Romana would, of course, believe to have received her note of dismissal. To repeat this dismissal in his own name and in words calculated to send the boy about his business without delay seemed the simplest solution of the difficulty.

With the two notes in his hands he reached the post-office and learned with satisfaction that the post for Rostok was starting almost immediately in order to profit by the precarious existence of the bridge.

"Time is gained, if nothing else," he said to himself as he slowly turned homeward. "If I can get Romana away before the matter is cleared up, then the game is won!"

CHAPTER XI.

At midday the rain came on again, and that afternoon—under the eyes of half Lyczyn and Rostok, to whom the spectacle, though not new, ever remained exciting, and amid a great snapping of wood and crashing of logs—the bridge first burst asunder, and then bit by bit was dragged away by the furious current. To Romana it seemed as though each one of those sharp snaps was a shot which struck her, as though with the rending of those wooden supports something in her heart also was being torn in two. For this meant separation —separation and silence; who could say for how many days? Looking at the wide, turbulent surface of water, Romana found the words of the old song of the *"Königskinder"* turning with tiresome persistency in her head:

> "Sie konnten zusammen nicht kommen,
> Dass Wasser war viel zu tief."

The one comforting thought was that of the letter which must have reached his hands by this time, and whose few lines made a bond between them which could reach over wider things, surely, and deeper things than even the Keremosz in its rage.

There was nothing to do now but to wait as patiently as might be and to watch the falling of the water. For three days after that disastrous

Pentecost Sunday the current remained too furious to permit of any attempt at communication. By Thursday, however, a rough raft had been rigged up, calculated only for the use of very impatient or very enterprising spirits.

"He will be the first to step on to it," Romana said to herself with a feeling of delight that was not unmixed with alarm, for the look of the construction was by no means reassuring.

But the raft made its first journey without Felix on it. From her post beside the wall Romana could see the landing-place clearly enough to distinguish the figures of those who stood huddled together upon the primitive platform of pine trunks with the water washing over their shivering feet. She saw there two Jews in *Kaftans,* which they had anxiously tucked up from contact with the wet. They were clinging to each other, pale with the alarm of the situation, which yet they had braved for the sake of who knows what trivial gain? but Felix she did not see. It could not be that he had less courage than those Jews, therefore he must have been prevented.

"Probably he cannot get away from his office so early," Romana said to herself, and at the next leisure moment returned to the wall.

The raft made two more voyages that day, but neither of them brought Felix.

"Can he be gone to the mountains already?" Romana asked herself, aghast. But immediately came the thought: "If he had had to go he would have written," for with the first raft the post had

come over from Rostok—the first post since Sunday —and there had been nothing for her.

By next day the river had fallen considerably. The road that ran below the garden wall was free now, though coated with slime, while a line of rubbish left there by the retreating water seemed to mimic the sea weed deposits of the ocean. Those of the willow bushes that had not been uprooted had their draggled branches stuck full of sticks and weeds,—untidy clumps, which gave the impression of being the wrecks of huge birds' nests.

The raft began to be in such requisition that a second and rather more secure-looking one was started. Romana strained her eyes till they ached, but nothing but unfamiliar or indifferent figures could she see upon either of these conveyances. Once she caught sight of a young man, whom she knew to be engaged to a girl living in this very street at Lyczyn. He was known to be a dandy, and yet had not shrunk from getting his patent-leather shoes drenched in order to visit his red-haired *fiancée*.

"And *he* does not come to me!" reflected Romana with a pang of almost painful humiliation.

There came the fifth day from the flood, but not on this nor on the following did the man whom she had thought of as ready to borrow the wings of a dove for the sake of rejoining her either come or give a sign of life.

Then a new terror seized upon her. Had he got her note? Roza asserted, indeed, that she had posted it; but perhaps, after all, it had not got

across or had got thrown aside in the general hurry and confusion of that agitating day. In that case he was still waiting for her answer and perhaps misconstruing her silence. Was it possible to write again? It seemed to her that it was not, but from the moment that this explanation had occurred to her she began to be tormented by an incurable uneasiness, which her father, watching, noted well and did not like. If the bridge had now been standing, she would have gone over on the mere chance of meeting him or somebody who knew him and getting at some sort of an explanation; but just now so bold a move seemed unfeasible.

When a few more days had passed it no longer seemed unfeasible, or at any rate it seemed more possible than to go on bearing this uncertainty. By this time the ferry had been got into working order and would have to last for the months necessary for the reconstruction of the bridge, and bonnets and skirts were now as frequently seen upon it as felt hats and *kaftans*.

It was at the hour at which she knew her father was busiest in the office that, summoning Roza from the kitchen, she started off for the landing-place. Her plan, born of desperation rather than of calculation, was to go to the Polinski's house under pretext of returning the borrowed umbrellas. Michal would be gone back to his studies at Lemberg she knew, and although she would much rather not see Aniela just now, there was no other house in Rostok which she could visit without attracting attention. From Madame Polinska she would at

least be able to ascertain whether Felix were still in the town or not.

But she was to get more news than she wanted, even before she reached her destination.

Not very far from the Rostok landing-stage she heard herself greeted by a thin, feminine voice, and stopped somewhat impatiently to shake hands with the same sharp-nosed, sharp-eyed young lady with whom Aniela had had a short conversation on the day of the *Mayalis,* among the forget-me-nots.

"It's quite a comfort to be united again," said Zosia Halinska with a smile that seemed both as chilly and as keen-edged as the blade of a knife. "You must have been pining to get to Aniela."

"Yes, I am going there now," replied Romana, making as though she would proceed.

"To congratulate her, of course. She will want your congratulations more than anybody's."

"Is there anything to congratulate her about?" and Romana stood still in her surprise.

"You don't mean to say that she hasn't written to you? Oh, come, you are making fun of me, are you not? You, her best friend, not to know what all Rostok knows already!"

"Not to know what?" asked Romana with growing irritation.

The small black eyes of her interlocutor, usually as hard and as bright as buttons, seemed to contract abruptly into pin-points as she said with the caution of a person who is a little afraid of the effect of her own words:

"Why, that she and Herr Weber have been en-

gaged since Tuesday. It's been the greatest surprise we've all had in our lives, I can assure you!" And the pin-points seemed to bore themselves straight into Romana's eyes.

"I don't believe it," said Romana before she knew that she had spoken, and for a moment the blood surged so wildly to her head that instead of the face of Zosia Halinska she saw only a black mist. Right out of the mist a voice was saying significantly:

"Oh, yes, I thought you would be surprised too! Men are most incalculable creatures, but I can't say I've met any one quite as incalculable as Herr Weber—"

She broke off rather suddenly, for Romana had stepped close up to her with eyes that now blazed.

"Why do you tell me lies? I know it cannot be true; but what is the use of inventing stories about poor Aniela?"

"Madame Polinska will tell you whether they are lies or not. There she is coming along. No doubt her word will be more worth than mine," and a trifle nervously (for she did not much like the look of Romana's face) Zosia slipped away just a moment before Madame Polinska in a pearl-grey dress, which successfully magnified her already fine proportions, stopped breathless and beaming beside Romana.

"You are coming to us, dear child, are you not?" she asked, extending a broad palm, on which the grey kid showed unmistakable signs of moisture. "Aniela will be so happy to see you."

"It isn't true, is it?" said Romana without appearing to see the hand. "The things they have been telling me about Aniela? It can't be true!"

"What have they been telling you?"

"That she is engaged to be married."

Even as she spoke she saw the smile on Madame Polinska's face expand to a point that could only be described as ecstatic.

"It is true, my dear; it is true. Thanks be to the Almighty! Between ourselves I will tell you that I had begun to be a little doubtful as to Herr Weber's intentions; for some weeks past he had kept away in so strange a manner. But evidently it was only some misunderstanding, for since Tuesday—just the day he went off to the mountains—all is right between them."

For a moment after Madame Polinska had terminated her little speech Romana stood quite still, forgetting even to remove her eyes from her informant's face. They were so wide open and had something so wild in their darkness that Madame Polinska began to feel uncomfortable.

"You are surprised," she murmured with a vague sense that there must be something here to apologise for. "Perhaps you are vexed with Aniela for not having written herself, but really these last days have been such a bustle, and what with the want of the bridge and the uncertainty of the post—"

As though with an effort Romana withdrew her eyes from the broad countenance before her, and making an uncertain gesture towards her forehead, turned to go.

"But that is not the way!" cried the bewildered matron. "You are coming to us, are you not?"

Romana stood still again and looked hard at the umbrella in her hand as though it were some new and surprising object, whose existence she had barely discovered.

"Yes, I was coming to you, but it was only to bring you back the umbrellas. Perhaps you can take them now, for I want to get home," and suddenly grown feverishly active, she took the second umbrella from Roza, put them both into Madame Polinska's hands and turning her back upon her, walked quickly back to the landing-place.

When she again stepped out on the Lyczyn side she had not yet got beyond the mere blank belief in the fact announced to her, neither had she found an explanation of this seeming impossibility, nor even begun to look for one. That raging sense of humiliation, from which she was to suffer so sorely later on, had scarcely yet come to her numbed consciousness. But one thing she nevertheless knew, one conclusion she had reached, and with so pressing a sense of its necessity that, scarcely at home, and in spite of knowing her father's intense dislike to being disturbed in his working hours, she went straight to his office, entering by the private door, which made it possible to avoid the overcrowded waiting spaces.

The notary looked up with a frown of displeasure as she came in, feverishly pulling off her gloves, her hat still on her head. Under its broad brim her face appeared so unnaturaly white that Morawek,

looking on it, told himself in his secret heart that it was time to prepare for battle. But her words were not those he had expected.

"Papa," she said, having scarcely shut the door behind her, "I have come to tell you that I want to go away. I don't much care where to, but you must send me away from Lyczyn for a time; as far away as possible and for a few months at least. I feel that I want a change, and there can't be any difficulty about the money after what you told me last week."

She let herself down on to the waxcloth sofa as she spoke with the gesture and also the voice of a person who is physically exhausted.

Laying down his pen, Morawek turned slowly in his chair towards her. A quantity of thoughts, of surmises, of combinations were rushing through his brain, but his massive face showed nothing of what was passing behind it. In the steadiness of his eyes no one could have read the exultation surging within him. This request of Romana's immensely simplified his plans. The child did not know, of course, nor did she require to know, that he had meant to send her away in any case, and had even taken all the preliminary steps. It was distinctly preferable that the arrangement should appear to be an outcome of her own wish rather than of his.

"You certainly look as if a change would do you good," he remarked, viewing her critically from under his down-drawn eyebrows. "For some time past you haven't been looking quite yourself. The

thing won't be difficult to arrange either. It's rather a strange coincidence that your Aunt Claudia is just now tormenting me to let her take you with her to Krywiec, where she has been ordered the baths. It's just the opening of the season there; I fancy you'll find it more entertaining than Lyczyn. What do you say to the idea?"

"Oh, yes, Krywiec will do," said Romana indifferently. "When does she start?"

"Next week. But you will require some new frocks. Your Lyczyn ones will never do for Krywiec."

"I can get them at Lemberg; that will be quicker."

"And perhaps easier too. In that case I shall telegraph to Claudia to-night, and take you up to Lemberg on Sunday. I lose less time that way. Will that do?"

"Yes, yes, perfectly. Oh, thank you, papa, for being so good!" And in a sudden fervour of gratitude she sprang up to kiss his hand. This so rapid compliance was indeed astonishing, but far too welcome to be closely examined.

"What can have put her into this hurry?" Morawek reflected when again alone in his office.

Cautious inquiries next day brought to his knowledge the latest engagement at Rostok, and with this came a flood of understanding and also of astonishment. Why, this was something far beyond what he had counted on; for so rapid and complete a success as this he had not ventured to hope.

BOOK II.

THE DRAMA.

CHAPTER I.

In the park of Surowica the scarlet maples and the golden beeches had October written large all over their brilliant, shivering foliage, yet the old woman who looked out upon them gazed with eyes as indifferent as though the scarlet had been dust-coloured and the gold were lead.

At first sight Countess Sobolewska was anything but prepossessing, nor even, despite the proud name she bore, very aristocratic looking. A short, stoutish, old woman, with a broad face of leathery consistency and a large mouth so tightly pursed up that it looked like a thin, greyish line traversing the lower part of her face, and had furrowed a deep groove on either side of the heavy chin. The tortoise-shell spectacles were seldom absent from her nose; through them and occasionally over them she was accustomed, coldly and critically, to take stock of the company. When she began to speak after a silence her voice rasped unpleasantly during the first words, like the hinges of a badly oiled door, and her manner entirely lacked that agreeable sua-

vity which characterises the Polish *grande dame*. A thoroughly unattractive, unamiable, old woman she appeared to be, and it was only very slowly and by small degrees that her acquaintances came to the conclusion that she was in reality more unhappy than intrinsically unamiable, and to understand that a great many different causes had helped to purse up that wide, thin mouth into what looked like a chronic protest against something—perhaps against Life in general.

Her history was commonplace but quite sufficiently heartrending. To put it briefly, Countess Sobolewska was one of those unlucky women who, having been disappointed in their husbands, turn for comfort to their children and are disappointed again.

Wanda Goralska had been plain-faced and rich, and had married the man she loved only to discover, in a brutally short interval, that it was her money he had wanted and not herself. Having thoroughly realised that in his gay and superficial existence she played no part, her heart would probably have petrified without further delay if it had not been for the three sons born to her in rapid succession. But when she had buried the two elder in their adolescence and had likewise laid their father in a premature grave—his weakly constitution ruined by excess of every sort—it seemed as though the measure of what she could endure must surely be full. It was dating from the last of these three funerals that her mouth had begun to purse up in its so characteristic fashion. Of all her lost happi-

ness there now remained to her only Wiktor, her youngest son, nor was this an unmixed remnant; for long before he was twenty the stricken mother began to acknowledge to herself that, despite his apparent amenability and demonstrative affection, he was most unmistakably made of the same stuff as his father. That incorrigible Polish *insouciance*, that unreasonable and irresponsible light-heartedness towards all the duties of life from which she had suffered so much already, laughed at her out of Wiktor's light grey eyes as plainly as they had done out of those of Karol. The real pang of the situation lay, not in any opposition which he offered, for indeed he offered none, but in the impossibility of maintaining a hold upon him; for Wiktor was one of those over-pliable natures which are so difficult to influence permanently for the very reason that they are so easy to influence passingly; a nature which becomes unmanageable by dint of being too easily managed, and which is so hard to contend with exactly because it is so weak. The last argument, the last word, the last impression was always paramount with him, but, as in the nature of things, the last was constantly becoming the second last, it followed that neither his resolutions nor his actions could be counted upon with any certainty for two days running. Every chance companion, every passing circumstance, left its mark upon him—but not for long. Every touching sight, even every picture he saw or melody that he heard affected him—but never deeply. The motive of his actions was not reflection, but impulses which, once acted on, seemed

to die a natural death, never leading to a sustained effort of any sort, or at least never having as yet led to it. There is generally very little real evil in such characters as these, and yet they often come to worse ends than many worse men, simply because there are, on the whole, more evil influences abroad than good ones. They generally fall victims, not so much to others as to their own over-receptiveness. Such men can be kept straight throughout life, but only on the supposition that nothing but a favourable breeze ever fills the sails of so light a skiff.

By her side Wiktor had always shown himself so much of a model son that Madame Sobolewska had at moments entertained the hope of turning him into a respectable and even useful member of society. But there came the time when she had perforce to let her pretty butterfly spread its wings, and once out of her sight she could never feel sure of the plight in which he would return to her, or even if he would return at all. The one salvation she could see for him, the one hope of giving stability to his character, was an early and judicious marriage; also from the moment he had reached manhood she had been quietly looking round her in the hopes of discovering the saving power. Perhaps from a little over-fastidiousness in herself—for despite her common features Countess Sobolewska was incorrigibly aristocratic in all her instincts—or perhaps because of a touch of maternal jealousy at the thought of surrendering Wiktor to another woman, she had, by the time he was twenty-six, not

yet succeeded in choosing for him. And then, like a lightning flash out of the clear sky, came the news that Wiktor had chosen for himself.

The circumstances of his abrupt betrothal had been well calculated to agitate the heart both of the mother and of the aristocrat. A notary's daughter! The first wife not of noble lineage who for centuries past had reigned under the roof of Surowica! A chance acquaintance made in one of those so odiously "mixed" watering-places where the natural barriers between different grades of society always show a propensity to become rickety and not infrequently fall flat to the ground. It was a bitter thought to the woman whose mind, despite a large measure of common sense, had been moulded in the tyrannical ideas of caste which still reign supreme among Polish aristocrats. That Wiktor, with his natural superciliousness, his very lively sense of his own social importance, should have condescended to this, could only be explained in one way. Notaries' daughters have not infrequently got good portions, but Wiktor had no sordid views regarding matrimony: this much she was able to tell herself with a sigh of satisfaction. It could only be, therefore, that she was very beautiful, and at the thought the mother, for the moment, took the upper hand of the aristocrat and began examining the event from the point of view peculiar to mothers. There could be no doubt that this looked like a love match, and despite her own bitter disappointment she still, in her innermost heart of hearts, believed in Love. It had

saved many men from themselves, what if it were to save Wiktor? All at once her feeling towards the notary's daughter, whom she knew as yet only from the boyishly glowing description in Wiktor's letter, began to be less purely inimical.

"I could not make my husband love me," she said to herself, "but I was plain, and this girl can't help being beautiful, else she would not be Wiktor's *fiancée*. It all depends now upon whether she loves him, and that I shall know the first time I see them together. If yes, then all may be well—all except the connection, of course. Ah, why could not the boy have taken a fancy to Mimi Rolnicka or to Eveline Tornowska? As if we had no beauties in our own circles!"

With the open letter in her hand she sat brooding, her wide mouth pursed up into an aggravation of its usual expression, showing that the aristocrat was having her turn now.

The thought passed through her mind: "If I were to send for him at once I might yet talk him out of it. I can do anything with him when I have him by me." But even while thinking it she shook her head. Despite her narrow prejudices, the outcome of education rather than of character, she was, after all, too honest to interfere. Besides, there was that faint hope moving in her heart, the hope that for Wiktor might be reserved that sweet domestic happiness which she herself had longed for so ardently and had missed.

The sentiments with which she received her daughter-in-law could, under the circumstances,

not well help being of a fiercely contending nature, not by any means calculated to soften her lack of outward amiability. Wiktor had been in such a hurry to bind himself irrevocably, perhaps because he preferred not to meet his mother until this unequal marriage was a *fait accompli,* that it was only a few days after the quiet wedding at Lemberg (which, as a sort of modified protest against her son's choice she had elected not to attend) that Countess Sobolewska and Romana met. Among the many agitating moments in the Countess's troubled life few had been more agitating than the one in which, standing on the doorstep of Surowica and clasping her daughter-in-law's hand, she had looked into her eyes as though to read there the fate of her son.

On just such a mild October day as this it had been, for to-day it was exactly a year since the coming home of the young couple, and this was one of the reasons why the old lady sat alone in her room, thinking so deeply.

Much had happened in this year—or else nothing at all—just as you chose to take it; and yet her hopes were dead,—so the mother told herself as she carefully wiped her spectacles, without which she could not bear to be, even when neither reading nor working. Not that she had made any new discoveries lately. It had taken her nothing like a year to discover all there was to discover. Looking back now, it seemed to her almost as though even on the evening of meeting she had begun to guess the truth of which she was long since sure.

She could recall the thrill of excitement which had passed over her as she recognised the beauty of the woman whom Wiktor had married. She had expected and even wanted her to be beautiful, but this was more than she had hoped for. And her youth, too, her extreme youth, seemed to hold hope in it. It was not likely, surely, that this child with the passionate black eyes should have made a purely ambitious marriage! More likely, at any rate, that it was her heart which had spoken, rather than her head. And, far too anxious to be amiable, she set herself to watch with a closeness of attention which to the young wife appeared merely inimically critical. Of Wiktor's state of feelings there could be no doubt. He was still at that blissful stage at which the lover is incapable of finding any fault with his happiness for the reason that he has not yet quite arrived at believing in its reality. But the girl was not so easy to read at a glance; all that seemed immediately clear was that her nerves had been somewhat overstrained by the rapidity of late events. The suggestion of excitement in her manner, the naïve and almost exaggerated delight in the princely aspect of her new home, might be symptoms either of perfect happiness or else merely of an unavoidable mental exaltation; she might be thus gay and talkative because she loved Wiktor or else because she was carried away by the novelty and splendour of her new surroundings.

The first doubt came to the mother's mind while they were walking in the park. It was such a park as the notary's daughter had never seen in her life

and could not look on with equanimity, thinking it was her own. At her heels there walked a silky, brown setter, with whom she had made friends from the moment of her arrival.

"May I keep a dog of my own?" had been one of her first questions. "Papa would never let me have one." Nor could she conceal her delight when assured by her husband that she might keep a pack of hounds, if she chose.

"And do the fountains play in winter?" she now asked to the delight of Wiktor, who thought he had never met anything to be compared with this adorable inexperience. "And what are those flowers behind the glass there? Can they be camelias? Oh, I have never seen camelias except in shops!"

"Even for your sake the fountains cannot play when the frost is on, my angel; but you can have a camelia for your hair every day until spring if you so command. Will you have one now? No, let it be this rose rather, the last rose of the season, and therefore rarer than any camelia!"

He cut off the burning red rose that glowed solitary upon its bush, and still laughing his tenderly amused laugh, made as though he would fasten it in the front of her dress. But with a lightning-like frown that was come and gone in the space of a breath, she snatched it out of his fingers.

"No, no, give it to me! I shall put it into my hair for dinner."

Quick though that frown had been the mother had seen it, and not liked it. Young wives are sometimes coy, especially in the presence of third

persons, but there had been something about the instinctive vehemence of the gesture which set her thinking.

A little later, when she had gone to the young Countess' room to fetch her down to dinner, another small circumstance deepened the impression received.

Romana had exchanged her travelling dress for a cream-coloured cashmere which made Madame Sobolewska discover anew how intensely black was her hair. A plain gold chain was round her throat, but the rose which Wiktor had gathered so enthusiastically lay unheeded and already fading upon the table.

"Has he seen you in this dress already?" asked the old woman, unable to take her eyes off the dazzling apparition.

"Has who seen me?"

"Why, Wiktor, of course!" she said, with the sharpness of astonishment. "How could there be another 'he' for a wife not yet two weeks married?"

"No, I have not worn it yet."

"Then I am afraid he will not eat much dinner," said Madame Sobolewska, with a quite exceptional effort at being agreeable, and a disclosure of the teeth that was evidently meant for a smile. "It only wants that rose in your hair to make the picture perfect. Why is it lying there? You said you would wear it."

Romana was examining herself in the glass, perhaps a little astonished at her own more than usually seductive appearance.

"Perhaps the picture had better remain imperfect," she said, with a short laugh that sounded almost a little hard. "It would be a pity if Wiktor ate no dinner; he has not eaten much lately, at any rate."

Madame Sobolewska said nothing more, but a chill had entered into the very core of her heart. Those were not the words nor was that the tone of a woman living in the first rapture of love. Romana had not said it plainly, but that laugh had said it for her. Looking back at the scene in the park and putting the two incidents together, it was not hard to guess that Wiktor's ardent and probably aggressive love was more of a burden than a delight to this child. It was the same as though she had said: "If you find me so beautiful already I had better not make myself more beautiful still, or he will become insupportable."

In silence the two women descended the staircase together.

Before a week had passed Madame Sobolewska knew for certain that the last and most forlorn hope of all these she had cherished had failed her as surely as all the others had done. From the moment that she said to herself in her heart plainly: "She does not love him," from that moment she had begun to feel towards Wiktor's wife something that was as intense as had been the hope she had so wildly cherished, as fierce as were the fears which now recommenced to pursue her: something which if it were not hatred was near akin to it. In the bitterness of her disappointment all the more trivial objections

to the marriage which, under other circumstances, she would have so gladly sacrificed, began again to raise their petty heads. In Romana's personal bearing indeed, even her fastidiousness could find nothing to cavil at, for the system of seclusion practised by Morawek had had the advantage of preserving the girl from that flavour of provincial gentility which is far harder to eradicate than any amount of downright bad manners. But even with this terror escaped there remained enough bitterness. The ignominy of Wiktor having for father-in-law a small, provincial notary suddenly recovering all its poignancy, put into her manner towards the low-born intruder a shade of haughtiness which, for all her outward observance of form, became yet at moments unmistakable and which could not fail from the first to embitter the intercourse between these two. It is not the love of lovers only that is blind; that of mothers, if enough intensified by suffering, is quite as competent at not seeing two paces before it—which is the only explanation of the fact that Madame Sobolewska, in spite of not being a stupid woman, could not discover in her daughter-in-law anything but an ambitious and heartless minx, who had simply sold her pretty person for a title and a position, after the good, old, time-honoured plan. Such a person as this she felt justified in despising. Then came the discovery of Romana's religious creed, or rather of her want of a religious creed—in its way almost as great a shock as had been the discovery of her lack of nobility; and Madame Sobolewska finally recognised that

between her and the notary's daughter there never could by anything in common. In her own mind she never designated Wiktor's wife as anything but "the notary's daughter," and so successfully had she revived all her aristocratic prejudices that at moments she even lost sight of her real grievance against her, which was neither her birth nor her creed, but simply Wiktor's lost happiness, or of the fact that if she came near to hating her now it was only because she had been prepared to love her so entirely and so gratefully.

For every day of the year that was passed had more surely brought home to her the conviction not only that that happiness was lost, but also that the mere semblance of it which still existed was at the mercy of the first breath of chance or of passion that came near it.

That was the reason why, on the day of an anniversary that was to her so solemn and so significant, Madame Sobolewska sat looking out upon the scarlet maples and the golden beeches of the park with eyes that seemed to see nothing agreeable, and with her wide mouth more fiercely pursed up than ever.

CHAPTER II.

THOSE same maples and beeches on which Wiktor's mother was looking so indifferently were at the same hour being gazed upon by Wiktor's wife, and with the same indifference. In another room of the big, almost palatial mansion Romana sat alone, looking out of the window and doing just what her mother-in-law was doing—that is, thinking; for the date in the calendar had signalled an anniversary for the younger as well as for the elder Countess Sobolewska. Yet on the young face there was not much more gaiety to be discerned than on the elderly one, nor more hope in the eyes of the wife of a year than in those of the woman who had buried a husband and two sons. To be not yet nineteen and already to have lost one's faith in life is bitter, and yet if Romana had not yet reached that point she was approaching it.

The events of last summer had been a little too precipitate for her inner consciousness entirely to keep pace with them. Even now, looking back at them from the vantage ground of more than twelve months, it was difficult to understand how exactly they had come about, and why just this solution of the situation had been reached. From the moment that she had left Madame Polinska, planted in speechless astonishment beside the landing-place at Rostok, until the moment when she found herself

installed at Surowica as Wiktor Sobolewska's wife, events had seemed to march of themselves, causes and results to fit into each other with the precision and inevitableness of a well-constructed machine which once has been set agoing. And the motor which had set this particular machine agoing had been the overpowering desire to get away from Lyczyn, the tyrannical wish never again to see Aniela or Felix. This was all she could in memory disentangle from the turbulent emotions of the first days after the shock, all she was aware of until her wounded pride recovered enough vitality to lift its head. Then only the real suffering began. As for explanations, the only one she had been able to find—that her note had not reached Weber—was no explanation. If his love had been what she imagined it was he would have waited, he would have tried again, he would have done anything rather than throw himself into Aniela's arms for a consolation which it seemed that the next best woman was able to afford. The true explanation was that his love had been a delusion, possibly a self-delusion, but not the less despicable for that. Oh, why had she not better pondered the warning which had lain in Michal's words! They had been wild words, but they had contained a truth. She saw it clearly now. It had been Aniela who had possessed the heart of the fickle man all along, while she herself had done no more than dazzle his eyes for a passing moment. Their few meetings had formed but an episode, a stumbling block on the path of true love which had been successfully overcome.

Thinking now of all that she had been ready to do for this man, of all that had passed in her mind during the hours when she had believed herself loved—and even though it had but passed in the deepest intimacy of her consciousness—she felt as though she must scream out under the sting of the humiliation. To her high-mettled and intolerant spirit it was almost as though she had thrown herself upon his neck only to be pushed aside. Disdained! There was no escaping from the nakedness of that fact which at every turn of thought confronted her. She had offered herself, or as good as offered herself, to a man who was almost a stranger, and he had rejected the offering. Away, away from here! As far away and as soon as possible! Before chance brought her face to face either with the man who had rejected her or the woman who had been preferred to her; for of what she might do in such a case she was not sure, yet retained just enough command over herself to be vaguely afraid. There was a fierceness in her thoughts when they turned on Felix, a thirst for vengeance in some form or other, which made almost anything appear possible and which she not unnaturally took for hate.

But she had no plans. Everything remained dark and confused, even for a few weeks after her appearance at Krywiec, which had marked the sensation of the season. Then, from out of the chaos of impressions around her, Wiktor's figure began gradually to emerge, gradually and yet rapidly. He was thin, dark, elegant, almost everything that Felix had not been—in itself a recommendation.

He was also ardent, quite as ardent as Felix had appeared to be, and able to translate his ardour into a homage far more gracefully turned than any of the forms to which the country-bred engineer had been able to attain. In addition to all this he was titled and rich, but it was not until her ears began to ache at the praises sung to him, or rather to his position, by her enraptured Aunt Claudia that the true value of these circumstances suddenly burst upon Romana's mind.

Would not this be a way of vindicating the claims which had been so cavalierly pushed aside? Of avenging her wounded dignity? To show the man who had disdained her that she too could disdain in her turn; that, although he had not found it worth while to be true to her, others—and of more social value than he—were ready for her sake to commit what would be counted as a social crime?

This idea once in her mind, she began to look at Wiktor with different eyes, with eyes that were resolved to see favourably; for although immediately on the back of the moral catastrophe undergone, her first impulse had been to throw the idea of love overboard as having been tried and found wanting, and frankly to adhere to her father's materialistic theories, the thing was not quite easy to carry out. In a heart so young as this Love does not lay down his crown until it be torn from his head. Morawek, indeed, had inwardly exulted when on the evening of the day on which he had taken her to Lemberg and a few minutes before his departure, Romana, after a long silence, had said unexpectedly:

"I think you are right, Papa, after all."

"I usually am right," he answered unperturbed; "but what am I right about just now?"

"About its being foolish to stake everything upon a passing fancy for a person. It seems to me much more sensible not to marry for love, or at least not for love alone."

"I knew you had too much sense not to come to this decision," the notary had said, secretly triumphant; but what could a notary—and such a notary as this—know of the ins and outs of a heart of seventeen?

Not to marry for love alone was not the same thing as marrying without love, so at least Romana discovered when brought face to face with the possibility of putting her theory into practice. Therefore it was that her eyes tried so hard to see favourably, and thanks to Wiktor's youth, to his ardour, perhaps a little to his tailor, but more to that untranslatable aroma of the *grand monde* which even inexperience infallibly distinguishes from the imitation article, and which it is far easier to despise than to resist, Romana was able to see as she wanted to see. That he admired her passionately and probably loved her deeply no one could doubt, nor of the social triumph which the marriage would be. Frequent meetings worked up all these elements so successfully that when one evening during a walk in a somewhat private avenue of the *Curgarten* Wiktor took her hand and said: "May I?" Romana answered: "Yes," nor suspected that in taking him she was creating a typical case of:

"Das Mädchen nimmt aus Ärger den ersten, besten Mann
Der ihr in den Weg gelaufen—"

The hurry which Wiktor immediately got into for the marriage suited her perfectly. Felix and Aniela were to be married in the end of October (in spite of herself Lyczyn news reached her), and it seemed to her that her triumph would only be complete if her wedding preceded theirs. So Wiktor's impatience met with encouragement rather than opposition. She would never show her face again at Lyczyn as Romana Morawek, and it was in deference to her wishes as much as to those of Wiktor that the wedding had taken place at the house of her Aunt Claudia.

It is but just to Romana's powers of discrimination to say that the delusion she had talked herself into—the part of the delusion, at least, which applied to her husband—did not outlive the wedding day. She had to languish through no slow stages of doubt, for with her most transitions were abrupt and ungraduated. On the morrow already she knew for certain that she did not love him, but did not because of this discovery immediately begin to regret the step she had taken. For this her nerves were still at too high a pitch of strain. Perhaps it was simply that Love was something different from what she had imagined it to be, or perhaps she herself was different from other women in this point—not capable of loving as she had heard that some people loved.

A year had passed since then, and that which at first had appeared only to be, among a confusion

of thoughts the least confused, now stood out with the precision of a creed. What she had then suspected she now felt sure of. With astonishment and pity did this cynic of eighteen look back at the time when she had cavilled at her father's harsh judgment of a sentiment sung by so many poets. It required courage, certainly, to flout so time-honoured an institution as Love, but he was right. Yes, a thousand times he was right. That which went by so proud a name was after all but a caprice of the fancy, ephemeral or brutal, sometimes both, and certainly not worth the sacrifices which she had once dreamed of bringing to it. The most unimpeachable personal experience convinced her that it was so: had she not thought to love first Felix and then Wiktor? and was not the one quite indifferent to her now while she detested the very thought of the other? Nor was this all, for just as certainly as she knew that her husband possessed no power whatever over her, just as clearly was she beginning to understand that the power she once possessed over him had, even in one year, waned with a rapidity which—to any one not intimately acquainted with his individuality—must appear almost inexplicable. When she thought of how hot his hand used to be when it touched hers only a year ago, of the hunger in his light grey eyes that used to disquiet her each time they were left alone for only a few minutes, and when she saw him now lounging indifferently by her side, or even did not see him for days together—for of late he had resumed his habit of accepting every invitation that

came his way—it sometimes seemed to her that this was not the same man she had married. She could not know that if he had appeared to change so completely it was only because he had not changed at all, because not even the episode of a perfectly sincere love could make of him anything but the quicksilver Wiktor, who in the nursery already had been the despair of his attendants because of his incapability of playing longer than half an hour with the most expensive toy procurable; because, in fact, his love, like every resolution and every impulse of his life, whether for good or evil, had not been graven in rock, but written in sand. To be delivered from his aggressive ardour was unquestionably a relief, but to such a woman as Romana it could not fail to be also a mortification. Not taking enough interest in her husband to penetrate the essence of his nature, she inclined to attribute her failure to something in herself rather than to something in him. By this time she could not well have any more doubts about her beauty; why was it then that, in spite of it, she could not keep a man faithful to her? This was her second experiment, so to say, and also her second failure. Was it that she lacked some element essential to the enslavement of men? Or, to come back to the old starting point, was it simply that the sentiment itself did not exist, or was at least incapable of permanency? Probably that was the right solution.

Not that any one but a very close observer would have discovered that Romana was not perfectly satisfied with her lot in life. If nothing else, the desire

to carry off the situation with as high a hand as possible before her mother-in-law would have sufficed to make her smile at many moments when a sigh would have come more readily to her lips. For if the husband had been a disappointment, the mother-in-law had in a minor degree been as complete a one. The first mention which Wiktor had made of his mother had awakened a certain commotion in Romana's mind. Mothers in general were things about which she always felt a wistful and rather awe-stricken curiosity, and the idea of acquiring one who would almost belong to herself sent a vague thrill of hope through her heart. Eagerly she had questioned Wiktor, and had inwardly rejoiced at the tenderly enthusiastic words with which he had spoken of his only surviving parent.

Whatever unformed aspirations may have begun to stir in Romana's heart began to fade under the first glance out of Madame Sobolewska's tortoise-shell spectacles and quite withered away within a week of her arrival at Surowica. Nor was this very astonishing, for what she saw—all there was to see, in fact—was an unsmiling old woman who looked as though she had an invisible knife in her hand and were mentally dissecting her, and who early began to exhibit symptoms that flavoured of positive animosity. Nor was the animosity hard to explain, but the explanation which occurred to Romana was half true, and therefore more mischievous than if it had been quite false.

"Remember that if I have no coat of arms I have

a safe full of money," had been one of her father's last injunctions to her; "and do not let these aristocrats put their feet upon your head, for it is money that rules the world now and not titles."

The hint had sufficed to explain her mother-in-law's attitude, nor did it require the lesson to put her spirit up in arms. The first symptom of condescension had been the signal for the first display of opposition, and so full of irrepressible vitality was the nature of both women that within a few weeks already these two, who needed each other so sorely, had learned to see each in the other an almost undisguised enemy, and without ever suspecting that in this polite but none the less bitter warfare they were in reality wreaking upon each other a mutual disappointment. To irritate this hostile critic, mildly to outrage her ideas of propriety as well as her habits of thought had long become for Romana one of the few things that gave zest to her present existence. Just as in the Lyczyn days she had delighted in deliberately shocking the girls who had looked at her as though she were a moral outcast, with the same enjoyment did she now shock the spectacled, forbidding old Countess; with the same pleasure and with less mercy, not because her heart was a year older, but because it was harder and possibly also sorer.

When she thought of Aniela now, the only woman who had never roused her incorrigible spirit of opposition, it was with a dull pang of envy, not because she was Felix Weber's wife—how could she envy her the love of a man whom she so

ardently hated?—but because she had heard that she was happy and also because of another piece of news which had reached her quite recently. She had not wanted a child herself, and yet when she knew that Aniela was a mother she felt as though she had been cheated of something. There came moments when in her secret heart of hearts she actually felt jealous about that baby; a baby was something so nice and helpless, something that would let itself be loved in a comfortable, irresponsible sort of way, just as puppies or kittens let themselves be loved, and from whom one need not expect any return,—for that, of course, could only again mean disappointment. But these were only moments. In her saner moods—and these now generally prevailed—she quite recognised that a child would be a distinct bother, a disturbing element in the plan of existence she had now finally traced for herself.

And yet it was of that baby she was thinking as she sat looking out upon the glories of the autumn park.

CHAPTER III.

THE red and yellow trees in the park first turned brown and then bare, then, after many weary months, green again. The paths so long blocked with snow became fit to be walked on by even the most lightly shod feet, and the basket chairs, having passed the winter in the hot-house, were brought out once more and placed under the big acacia, whose branches made so perfumed a tent.

Under this acacia the three inhabitants of Surowica, more or less by chance, found themselves assembled one afternoon in May. They had come here singly, Romana first with a book which she had taken up at random, imagining it to be a volume of Max Nordau, but which she had subsequently identified as Shakespeare—whether to her pleasure or displeasure she was not quite sure, for it was only since her marriage that she had made acquaintance with the poets, of which Morawek's library had been carefully weeded at the time her education began. She had been told then that poets were the maniacs of the world; all the more startling was it therefore to recognise in their pages things which she had never learned and which yet were not strange to her. Things so certain to be disapproved of by her father that, even now, she could not take up any volume in verses without the

guilty feeling which accompanies the nibbling at forbidden fruit. To-day she had taken a rather deeper bite than usual before her solitude was broken into by Madame Sobolewska, walking more slowly than was her habit, her old rheumatic enemy having lately kept her a prisoner in the house. With her it was probably physical fatigue which caused her to make a station here despite the prospect of a *tête-à-tête* with "the notary's daughter," and doubtless it was not she alone who felt relieved when a few minutes after she had let herself down heavily into her chair another step was heard, and Wiktor, in riding dress, came round a clump of syringa bushes. It was four days since either his wife or his mother had seen him. Something which he discreetly designated as "business" had within the last weeks taken him more frequently than usual to Lemberg. But to judge from the jaunty and satisfied air with which he generally reappeared after these expeditions, as well as from the curious way in which the jauntiness withered away under the scrutinising gaze of his mother, the business cannot have belonged to the dry and tedious order of that species of occupation. This time the absence had been longer than usual, and the scrutinising glance therefore all the severer, but only that which came from the eyes of the mother. The eyes of the wife had indeed flashed up for a moment as they first fell upon him, only to turn away again indifferently, almost contemptuously, and it was without apparent excitement or even interest that she replied to his rather over-effusive greeting and listened to the

small-talk of the capital into which he somewhat nervously plunged. The intercourse with her husband lacked even the bitter zest which the various passages of arms with her mother-in-law still brought to Romana. With him she never crossed arms, being too proud to utter reproaches which touched the vital subject and having no cause for complaint on any other; for Wiktor, with all his defects, had the supreme merit of innate courtesy, and in ceasing to be ardent had not ceased to be deferential. That this child-wife had been more a caprice of his fancy than a passion of his heart he had long since admitted to himself. To marry a notary's daughter had been an indulgence which a Count Sobolewski could afford himself without losing vitally in the eyes of the world; but having enjoyed the luxury for only a few months, advancing satiety whispered to him that, after all, he had condescended a little too much. A coarse-grained nature would have made her feel it in a more vulgar if perhaps more honest way, but Wiktor could no more be vulgar than he could eat stones. Being essentially harmless and amiable, he bore Romana no grudge for the mistake which he had made, but contented himself with seeking such compensation as was to be found in that sacred social circle which he now felt that he ought never to have left.

Presently, in the midst of Lemberg gossip, another step on the gravel and another sensation of relief among the uncongenial trio. From behind the same clump of bushes from which Wiktor had appeared there now emerged another figure as slim,

as elegant, and at first sight almost as youthful as that of the master of Surowica.

"Oh, the doctor!" and Wiktor rose with alacrity.

"Yes, the doctor," murmured Countess Sobolewska, with an unconscious tightening of the lips as, over her spectacles, she shot a side glance at her daughter-in-law. Romana was smiling with a certain degree of animation.

"This is nice of you, doctor," she said, perhaps a little more warmly than she would have done but for that glance over the spectacles. "You have not been to see us for a long time."

"For three days, I think," observed the Countess, shortly. "I was just going to observe that professional zeal evidently devours you. You have come to inquire after my rheumatism, of course?"

"If the ladies will let me speak I will explain everything," smiled the doctor, as he bent first over the withered hand of the Countess and then over Romana's white fingers—as white as the blossoms of the acacia overhead. "My first and chief object is, of course, to ascertain the state of my patient, but I have another mission as well. I am glad to see you have a shawl, Countess; the month of May can smile, but it can also pinch. Generally speaking, I approve of this sortie of yours, but I cannot accord you longer than till seven o'clock."

While speaking the doctor had taken place on the chair pushed towards him by Wiktor, and sat well revealed in the tempered sunlight. Strictly speaking he was more elegant than handsome, more well-turned than well-built. Although past forty, his

youthfully slim figure still awoke the envy of men of twenty-five, while a gold *pince-nez*, a well-cared for black moustache, a pleasant gravity of manner and a complexion so pale as to awaken not only interest but curiosity, made out a list of attractions which for many people had proved irresistible. If report spoke true the paleness of Doctor Ligrinow's complexion had a serious, almost a tragical, background to it. Heart disease in one of those forms which, while often giving its victims a long tether, yet reminds them of their bondage by periodical fits of an almost unbearable pain, was said to be his heritage. If this were true—which no one but those nearest him could say, since he allowed no approach to the subject—then this man, who by many was considered to be both unscrupulous and worthless, deserved a certain measure of commendation and even admiration for his equable humour and the cheerful pluck with which he took his full share of the work of life. Perhaps vanity had as much to do with it as pluck. A man who with the intimate certainty of the expert knows his life to be daily hanging in the balance and who yet is never morose, always open to every interest and always scrupulously careful of his appearance, is sure to be wondered at for his Spartan-like qualities. As was only natural, this attitude worked strongly on the imagination of the fair sex among whom Doctor Ligrinow found his chief patients—and also victims—for this youthful and yet grave-looking doctor enjoyed the reputation of being the most successful Don Juan, not only of the neighbourhood,

but of this part of Galicia. His mortal sickness, instead of being an obstacle in his way, became an instrument to his ends, by putting around him something of the pale halo of a martyr. Women who had successfully withstood what looked like greater temptations found that, after all, it was too hard-hearted to refuse anything to a man whose days were probably counted, a man who fulfilled his duties of doctor so heroically when by rights he ought to have been a patient. His name had been mixed up with several of the most sensational scandals of the last decade without having in the smallest degree damaged his professional reputation—there were cynics who insisted that it had even gained thereby—and without even destroying the harmony of his family life, for this eater of hearts was no irresponsible bachelor, but rejoiced in the possession of one of those blindly devoted wives who would be incredible if they did not exist, and whose forbearance can only be called abject unless one prefers to call it sublime. For fifteen years now Madame Ligrinow had nursed and adored her husband, had received him back into her arms more times than she could count, forgiving him everything unconditionally, without a reproach and apparently without a pang, as one forgives even the most extravagant caprices of a sick child. In this order of women conjugal love is always largely mixed with the maternal element, the mixture being larger when this element has been denied its natural outlet, which makes the process of forgiveness easier and less humiliating to the forgiver.

"Well, and your mission?" asked Romana, when the doctor had politely waved aside the silver cigarette case which Wiktor held towards him. Wiktor's butterfly memory never could remember which of his guests smoked and which did not, and yet it was notorious that the pale-faced doctor touched neither tobacco nor wine, perhaps because of his health, or perhaps because he had no passion beyond the one passion of his life.

"My mission has somewhat of an ecclesiastical flavour about it," said the doctor, carefully brushing a morsel of twig from the knee of his well-cut trouser. "Do you not detect the scent of incense about me? I come straight from St. Ursula's."

"The acacia smells too strongly to let us detect anything beside it," laughed Romana, "or else be sure that I would not let you sit where you are. If there is one scent I detest more than another it is that stuff they burn in churches. But what can *you* have been doing at St. Ursula's?"

"And supposing he had been saying his prayers?" asked the old Countess, with a warlike uplifting of the head: "would that surpass your comprehension?"

"Almost," said Romana emphatically, while her eyes and those of the doctor crossed in a glance of mutual comprehension.

"I have been doing, or trying to do what I attempt everywhere,—to heal bodies, which I suspect to be a more grateful task than any pains I might waste upon my reprobate soul. Mother Isidora has been down with an inflammation of the ribs since

last Thursday, but it was only to-day Doctor Melski found a consultation necessary."

"And they actually made up their minds to let you inside their cloister walls?" said Wiktor, breaking into a light-hearted laugh, "Poor sisters! What a flurry the sheep must have been in with the wolf inside the very fold!"

"When the sheep have reached a certain age unmolested I fancy they give up being frightened of wolves," replied the doctor, discreetly examining the toe of his boot.

"They certainly are a rare collection of antiquities," agreed Wiktor, still gently shaking with laughter. The idea of Doctor Ligrinow loose within the convent walls seemed immensely to tickle his mobile fancy, and not the less so because he had always felt a trifle jealous of the doctor, whom he would have had no objection whatever to emulate.

"And is it from Mother Isidora that you bring me a message?" sharply inquired the Countess, to whom this flippant turn of the conversation was eminently distasteful.

"No, it is from Sister Melania."

"Melania Powalska at St. Ursula's? Since when?"

"Only since last week, and because of a bad influenza she is recovering from and which caused country air to be prescribed by the Lemberg doctor. She asked me to tell you, and hopes you will take a drive in that direction some day soon."

"Poor Melania! Yes, of course I shall. It will do me good to talk over old times. You remember

Melania, do you not, Wiktor? You sat on her knee and ate the chocolate she had brought you the very evening before she started for Lemberg to take the veil. What eyes she had, to be sure! And what hair!"

"And yet she made up her mind to cut it off?" remarked Romana, in a tone that was meant to be provoking. "How did that come about?"

"People who have faith can make up their minds to many things," said the Countess severely. "But the way it came about was very sad. She had lost her heart to a young man who stood far beneath her, and had to choose between the displeasure of her family and the humiliation of her lover. She solved the difficulty by entering the cloister."

"You call that solving the difficulty? In what did he stand beneath her? Was he a scoundrel?"

"He was quite a worthy person, I believe, but for a Countess Powalska a quite impossible *parti*."

"What was there impossible about it?" persisted Romana. "Had they no money?"

"That was not the difficulty."

"What then?"

"My dear," said the Countess, with an icy stare and yet obviously ill at ease in the mental corner into which Romana had pushed her,—for although she liked to snub the "notary's daughter," she preferred, for the honour of the family, to do so without witnesses; "there are certain usages, certain unwritten laws, which it is not reasonable to sin against, and the value of which you are probably too young fully to understand."

"Or perhaps too prejudiced," suggested Romana, with an ominously pleasant smile. "*I* was not brought up on these unwritten laws, you see. Please just tell me what you think of Sister Melania's step, and I will show you the difference in our points of view at once. I'm morally certain that you admire her for it."

"Indeed I do. To me her resolve seems heroic."

"And I despise her!" said Romana, so vehemently that the doctor, who during the duel of words had sat silent with scarcely the shadow of a smile piercing the habitual gravity of his demeanour, shot towards her a swift glance of surprise.

"What to you seems heroic seems to me cowardly. You talk of her having lost her heart to this man. What was her heart worth then, I should like to know, if she could not sacrifice to it a mere prejudice? If she had cared for him really and truly she would not only have been ready, she would have been *glad* to have something by which to prove her love. It is so easy to make protestations, and so difficult, for some people at least, to throw over empty forms."

Romana put up her hand to her face, astonished to find that it was glowing.

"I fancy that is a difficulty which you will never encounter," said the Countess, drily, though she, too, gazed in some surprise at her daughter-in-law, not quite knowing how to explain this so obvious earnestness.

"She is right, mother," put in Wiktor, with ready tact. "Love laughs not only at locksmiths, but also

at pedigrees, and if you ask me to choose between Romana's point of view and yours, I must confess myself to Romana's, if only because I have an insurmountable antipathy to convent walls."

"Seven o'clock, Countess," gently admonished the doctor, pulling out his watch and at the same time half rising.

"Let me help you," said Wiktor, and with touches as light and tender as those of a woman he began to arrange his mother's shawl about her shoulders. The Countess looked towards Romana as she stood up.

"I suppose you are coming in too?" she asked, with a little hesitation.

Romana settled herself in her deep basket chair.

"Oh, yes, I shall be coming in presently; but just now it is too delicious to think of walls."

"But you have no shawl?"

"I don't need one, and if I did, Doctor Ligrinow would fetch me one; won't you, doctor? It's his business, you know, to look after people's health, so you can leave me under his charge with an easy mind."

The Countess said nothing, but pursing up her lips to a degree which rendered them almost invisible, slowly moved away on the arm of her son.

"Thank you," said the doctor's voice beside Romana, whose eyes were mischievously following the departing couple.

"What are you thanking me for?"

"For your confidence, of course, in my professional zeal. I cannot boast of any other."

"Any other zeal or any other confidence?" laughed Romana. Although it had been principally to provoke her mother-in-law that she had remained under the acacia tree with the doctor, his visits had in reality become the most agreeable breaks in her luxurious but monotonous existence. Of all the people she now came in contact with he was the only one who awoke anything like interest in her. With her mother-in-law he contrasted as favourably in amiability as he did with her husband in intelligence—with both in possessing something of that wide and rational outlook which intercourse with her father had accustomed her to. Even his quiet and well-bred cynicism suited her present mood marvellously. "It seems that we're a couple of infidels," he had once whispered to her during a discussion in which modern and mediæval ideas had clashed somewhat loudly; and from that moment it was undeniable that a sense of mutual understanding had drawn the two infidels closer together. She could not but feel grateful to the man who in face of so much antagonism shared her ideas, her beliefs, and yet more her disbeliefs. That he admired her she had found out long ago, up to what point she did not know and occasionally felt rather curious to ascertain, but there was nothing which seemed to her alarming in this circumstance. She had indeed heard that he was considered dangerous, without quite believing it, so effectually did that judicious yet anything but pedantic display of professional dignity seem to give the lie direct to his reputation, and so soothing an influence did it—in

spite of anything and everything—exercise on female virtue. Besides, even though the danger might exist for others, it could not for a woman who had so successfully outlived *those* illusions.

"Any other zeal or any other confidence?"

"Any other confidence beyond the poor one of accepting my company for ten minutes, and even this I need not be too vain of since I have just heard you say that it is too pleasant to go indoors. If you are sitting here it is undoubtedly more of a compliment to the acacias and the lilacs and the nightingales than to me. Ah, there is the concert beginning!"

He stopped, raising his hand, as though to entreat silence, but there was no need for that. Romana, leaning forward in her chair, was already listening, breathless. Her eyes sought the distant clump of bushes from which, upon the motionless evening air, a volume of sweetest, clearest sound had unexpectedly poured forth, as though some heart over there, finding itself too full of emotions, had suddenly overflowed. The feathered lover had been uttering his plaint for scarcely a minute when from close at hand another voice took up the strain; then another and another, from the depths of the leafy park there came back melodies so faint and languishing as to be scarcely distinguishable from the echoes; songs which, starting from the depths of grief, rose to the heights of joy, only to sink again ever and inevitably back into the likeness of sobs that tear the heart. And through it all not a sign of anything living. It was as though the dumb

trees themselves had taken voice in order to pour out upon the tepid air, together with the heavy scent of their blossoms, some harmony that slept within them. To the two listeners the notes arrived wrapped as it were in whiffs of acacia and syringa scent.

All at once, in the very thick of the entrancing concert, Romana sat up in her chair impatiently shaking her head.

"All lies!" she said, almost harshly.

The doctor, too, seemed to awake as though from sleep, and looked at her with eyes that had grown dreamy, and with his eyeglass dangling in his hand. Even without its help he could see that her eyelids were moist, and Romana—knowing that he saw it—inwardly ground her teeth. It was too enraging certainly that the nightingales of Surowica should sing exactly the same songs as those she had heard in the Keremosz Valley on the morning of the *Mayalis*.

"Who is telling lies?"

"Those nightingales, of course; they don't know what they are talking about! You would say, wouldn't you, to listen to them that they are all in love, over head and ears in love—have nightingales got ears, by the by?—and possibly they may be in love—for three weeks; but show them a bird with smoother feathers or a better turned beak or whatever it is that forms the attraction for nightingales, and they will stop sobbing at once."

"Say rather that they will start sobbing afresh, only with another object."

"Does that better the matter? You only tell me that nightingales are as inconstant as men."

She said it so bitterly that the doctor instinctively put on his eyeglass again. Although he was only a little short-sighted he could undoubtedly follow her expression better with its aid than without.

"If the object that produces the inconstancy is worthier," he said, with as grave a deliberation as though he were pronouncing the diagnosis of some difficult case; "and by worthier I here mean more attractive, then I should not call it inconstancy at all, but a higher understanding, a gradually developing æsthetic taste. In every business in life we are allowed and even counselled to progress from good to better, and is it to be forbidden to us in love alone?"

"Whether it is forbidden or not it is undoubtedly the custom," said Romana, with an irrepressible gesture of disdain. She was thinking now of Wiktor's latest absence, and of the half-satisfied, half-constrained air with which he had come into view round the clump of syringa bushes.

The movement she had made had displaced the book on her lap.

"Study or play?" asked the doctor, as he stooped to pick it up. "Shakespeare? It's the first time I have seen vou with a volume of poetry in your hand!"

"Oh, *he* tells lies too; as big lies as those nightingales!"

"I see—*Romeo and Juliet.* There's *one* lie in there, I know; that about Jove laughing at lovers'

perjuries. A monstrous calumny, I can assure you."

"On Jove, perhaps, but certainly not on the lovers. That's just the one true thing in the play; all the rest is raving. People don't do these sort of things because of each other."

The doctor smiled faintly as he turned over the leaves of the volume.

"I see, Countess, that you are determined to paint that unhappy boy Cupid as black as ink; and yet you spoke quite differently a few minutes ago!"

"I?"

"Yes, when we were discussing Sister Melania and the causes which led her to the cloister. To hear you speak of the sacrifices which you considered Love entitled to, who would have suspected in you such a sceptic?"

"That," said Romana, giving a sharp little bite to her underlip, "was principally for the pleasure of a little argument. You know I am rather fond of saying the contrary of what any one else says."

"So you would have thought Sister Melania as great a simpleton for marrying her man as for taking the veil, it would seem?"

"I don't know—yes, perhaps."

"What mistakes one makes, to be sure," said the doctor, gazing before him into the green distance over which the first shadows were already stealing. "After those words of yours I had actually imagined that you were one of those rare women for whom the world is well lost for Love."

Although his voice was quite equable Romana's

eyes went towards him with a dawning sense of alarm. He was not looking at her, and yet some instinct made her suspect that the *tête-à-tête* had lasted long enough.

"Really," she said, laughing as she rose, "I have had enough of those melodious lies for one night. What are you thinking of, doctor, to let me sit out so long? Do you suppose I want to share the fate of our King Jagiella? Certainly he must have had a taste for musical falsehoods, or else he would probably not have caught his death of cold!"

* * * * * * *

Within the house old Countess Sobolewska, having traversed the alley in silence on the arm of her son, turned abruptly towards him.

"You are playing a dangerous game, Wiktor," she said dryly.

"A game, mother? But I have never been more serious in my life."

"Perhaps not, but that does not prove that you are serious now. What can you expect to be the end of all this?"

"The end of what?" asked Wiktor, carefully helping his mother out of her shawl and as carefully avoiding her eyes.

"Let's have no comedies, please. The case is too simple for that. Your wife is young and beautiful, and although you may have forgotten that already —as it is your habit to forget things—others do not. Can you expect her to be true to you if you are not true to her?"

"Mother!" said Wiktor, putting up his head, "I

cannot allow even you to throw a suspicion upon her!"

For a moment he looked the embodiment of noble, wounded pride, the very copy of his haughty ancestors upon the walls around, but Madame Sobolewska had seen this display too often to be impressed.

"I am not throwing any suspicion upon her; I am merely pointing out to you the not unlikely result of your own conduct. History repeats itself, my boy, and observation teaches me that if a woman has such unusual attractions as has Romana, she requires one of two strong holds to keep her straight—a true affection or religion—and this girl has neither the one nor the other."

"But she is straight, quite straight," protested Wiktor, with the vehemence of an uneasy conscience.

"So far, yes; but do not be too sure of the future unless you change your plan of life."

"I am not afraid of the future," he blustered. "Romana is too proud, too unapproachable ever to go astray. And as for my plan of life, what's wrong with that? As if it were possible to live without break in this hole of a place!" and he looked round disparagingly at the luxuriously furnished room. "You know that I can't get on without a few distractions."

"I know it," said his mother, with weary acquiescence; "but then you must not be astonished if your wife also looks for distractions."

"Of course, of course," said Wiktor, beginning

to pace the room with signs of a dawning perturbation upon his mobile features. "When I hear you talk, mother, I know that you are right; but what would you have me do? Romana is so reserved."

"Make her love you and the reserve will vanish. Even although she may have married you out of ambition it need not be impossible to you to gain her heart. She is so young, after all! Most likely she does not know what she wants."

"Of course, of course," said Wiktor again, wincing a little this time. To hear it stated so plainly that he had not been married for his own sake was a stab to his innate self-appreciation, but a stab which could not smart for long. Even his vanity was of too volatile a nature to suffer for more than minutes at a time. "Yes, there must be a way; she is such a child, it should not be difficult to gain her heart if one knew how to set about it, and I know that, oh, yes, I know it!" He was laughing now as though at some pleasing recollection, twirling the end of his moustache the while and throwing a glance into the tall mirror on the wall before which he just then passed. "Yes, you are right, mother. I have been blind till now. It was only her reserve that disconcerted me, you know; but if I can break through that all will be right—yes, I know it will; and if I need advice you will give it me."

"Then I shall begin by advising you to curtail that *tête-à-tête* in the park," said his mother, smiling a little sadly at the eagerness which she knew so well of old.

Wiktor stood still, with an expression which on the instant became almost tragical.

"Is that what you want to say?"

"I only want to say that the evening is of a most romantic complexion, that the nightingales are singing, and that human nature is—well, just what it is."

"That is enough," said Wiktor, advancing towards the door.

"No heroics, please!" the Countess called after him, "and no provocation. There is no earthly cause for either. The measures I recommend are purely prudential ones. It is not by scowling at her acquaintances that you will gain your wife."

She had not done speaking when Wiktor came running back to kiss her hand, the model of a good and grateful little boy.

"Thank you, mother; you stopped me just in time. But I shall do nothing foolish. You can't imagine how sensible I feel now!"

With the most reassuring of smiles upon his lips he went out, and his mother, looking after him, thought to herself how excellently he was disposed, and, passing her hand across her eyes, sighed heavily.

CHAPTER IV.

SAINT URSULA was a convent which had come down in the world, as may happen to a convent as well as to an individual. Thirty years ago its wide walls had harboured quite a regiment of black-veiled nuns, and quite a flock of sun-bonneted and mittened maidens whose parents paid large sums yearly for what was recognised as the best education to be had in Galicia. The educational palm was still assigned to the order, but for the sake of meeting the demands of the age the scene of its labours had been transferred to Lemberg. The old convent in the country had now languished for years in a state of semi-vitality, having become no more than a species of refuge for those whose age rendered them useless in the capital or whose health had broken down under the stress of their educational duties. Here the old, the convalescent, and the incurable led a peacefully sleepy existence in the dispeopled convent, whose walls it was not worth while to keep in order, since at any rate there was about ten times as much room as the inmates required, down whose long corridors the rare steps echoed strangely and the majority of whose cells were given over to spiders and rats. In the vast grounds the trees had not been interfered with for a generation; of the kitchen garden, which erstwhile

had furnished so many hungry mouths, only a small corner was now cultivated, and the big fish-pond, once of such vital importance in Lent, had long since been victoriously invaded by flags and waving reeds.

"Beautiful but sad," said Romana to herself as alone she wandered about in the untended alleys.

When, after luncheon, she had announced her intention of accompanying her mother-in-law, the Countess had raised her somewhat faintly marked eyebrows.

"A convent is the last place I should have expected you to take an interest in," she curtly observed.

"I don't take an interest in it, but I want to see what a woman looks like who prefers a nun's veil to a family scene."

Upon which Madame Sobolewska had evidently preferred to drop the subject, and the old and the young Countess had started together, unaccompanied, for Wiktor had on that very morning again left for Lemberg. Not that the interview with his mother had not borne fruits, but that those fruits had already dropped off, as is their habit in light and sandy soil. Readily he had accepted her advice as to gaining Romana's heart, swinging himself without effort to the heights of exultant hope, but not having succeeded in four days, he had as readily sunk to the depth of black discouragement. On the fifth day had come a note from Lemberg, and on the sixth—long before the Countess was out of bed—her son was steaming away from Surowica in

a first-class compartment. It was fortunate, certainly, that the Lemberg train left so early, at least Wiktor thought so, knowing himself well enough to feel sure that an explanation with his mother would have meant the abandonment of his project.

Now the Countess was closeted with Sister Melania, and Romana, all alone, strayed about among the trees. She had had the glimpse she wanted of the woman who preferred a nun's veil to a family scene, and did not quite know what to make of her—just as she did not know what to make of any of these black-veiled women, of whom some positively tottered with age, and one at least bore on a young face the signature of Death plainly written, yet none of whom looked unhappy or even dissatisfied as they moved about noiselessly on their small, self-appointed tasks. Either by reason of years or of sickness it was certain that none of the permanent inmates of St. Ursula had long to live; all the more strange, therefore, that they should have managed to get hold of some recipe which seemed to make even this scrap of existence worth living, and apparently possible to be enjoyed.

She was pondering over this problem when she found that she had strayed into what was evidently a kitchen garden run wild, for flowering peas climbed the trees and cucumber trails ran over the path. Close at hand there were voices, but she did not notice them until, turning the corner of a tumble-down hothouse, she was met by an unexpected blaze of colour. Here, in the midst of the wilderness, there flourished in trim and well-cared-

for order every flower of the season, from the flaming peony to the humble double daisy, distributed not in beds, but in long, straight bands, each species and each shade of colour by itself with the regularity of a pattern card. Two black forms were moving about among the rows. Romana immediately recognised the young, consumptive nun leaning upon the arm of another who, to judge from the sit of her rounded back and the close wrinkles upon her mahogany-coloured face and hands, appeared to have shrunk to about half her original size, after the manner of a withered berry.

"She is choosing the flowers for the chapel," explained the small, shrivelled nun, indicating her companion. "That's always her business; mine is to grow the flowers and hers to bind them. I have enough strength left to rake and hoe a bit, but I never had any taste in my life and she has lots. I can get them to come out of the earth, but I can't get them to sit together in a vase without screaming at each other." And she showed her brown teeth with that same look of inexplicable contentment which Romana had noted on every face within these walls, even on that of the—in her eyes—so despicable Sister Melania.

The young one looked at Romana, her sunken eyes shining softly.

"And yet I tell Sister Katrina that she had better set about cultivating her taste, since it is quite certain that, when it comes to laying the wreaths on my coffin, I shall not be there to give advice."

"And I tell her that she had better wait until the

roses are out, at the very least, or better still, the asters. I have a fine show of them for the autumn, and really at a season when Saint Ursula is such a good imitation of Paradise there is no sense in being in such a hurry to get to Heaven, is there, Countess?"

And they both actually laughed as heartily as though the joke were quite an enjoyable one, and although the young one's laugh was interrupted by a fit of coughing.

Romana gazed in silence at the white face, whose whiteness contrasted so little with the ungainly starched cap; the half-transparent hand that closed nervelessly round a sheaf of crimson gladiolus. Were these people made of the same flesh and blood as herself?—or did they not rather belong to some other order of beings whose existence she had not yet suspected? With the sense of alarm which the unknown is apt to produce she hastened to leave the spot, and presently emerged on to a wide, circular space that had probably once been the recreation spot of the pupils, and where in former days, no doubt, hoops had been plentifully trundled and skipping-ropes had lashed the gravel. In the centre, upon a wooden pedestal, there stood a figure whose destination had been to preside over the gambols of youth. It was of wood, like the pedestal, and inartistically painted in now fortunately faded oil colour. But Romana did not look at the figure, her eyes had gone immediately to the inscription at the base: "Come to Me all ye that labour and are burdened, and I will relieve you." Laboriously she

spelled it out, and then remained looking curiously at the words which were as new to her as the New Testament was unfamiliar.

"It's a pity it's not true," she said to herself, as she walked on. "After all, it's a beautiful idea, that of a Being who holds everything in the hollow of his hand, upon whom one can absolutely rely. It can only have been a poet who invented a god—it's like the sort of ideas they have. And even although they are dreams they have a certain use; what else could make that girl over there so fearless of dying?"

She had been following the gleam of water and in another minute stood by the side of the big fish-pond, over whose sleeping surface the reeds softly swayed, while the yellow and purple iris, in their fullest flower, had crowded to the water's edge and seemed to be jostling each other for a place at the mirror. A flat-bottomed boat—one of those, no doubt, that in former days had been used for fishing purposes—lay upon the shore almost buried in the tall flowers. "It will do for a seat," thought Romana, as she stepped into it. There were reeds springing up through the very chinks of the shrunken boards, but that only served to cushion it.

"And there was no cynicism about it," she reflected, following her last train of thought as she settled herself in the bottom of the boat, with her head against the small cross bench, for the day was oppressive and she had begun to feel intolerably tired. "She did not speak bitterly, but really as though she did not mind, as though she knew—not

only fancied, but *knew*—that something better was coming. Now, if I were told that this was to be my last summer, that it was only a question of whether I should still see the roses or the asters, I wonder what I—"

But at this point her ideas began to wander and presently, with her head thrown back against the bench and the iris nodding around her, she had fallen fast asleep.

When she awoke after only a few minutes it was with a sudden sense of uneasiness.

"Don't move, for goodness sake!" said a voice at a few paces from her, and looking about her with dazed eyes she perceived Doctor Ligrinow standing a little back from the water's edge, after the manner of an art connoisseur who wishes to gain a better view of some masterpiece.

"You have spoiled the pose," he said, with a shade of reproach in his voice. "Nothing could have been more perfect than the picture was a moment ago. Quite a new variation upon Moses in the rushes."

"I did not come here to make pictures for you to look at," returned Romana, in some irritation, as she attempted to rise.

The doctor hurried to her assistance.

"Excuse me, Countess, but my passion for the æsthetic sometimes runs away with my discretion. To see a beautiful thing and not to stare my eyes out at it is to me an impossibility. It really is by mistake that I am born in this century and under this clime—my real home is Athens, in the Age of

Beauty. You must forgive me this time; it is not every day that a mortal chances upon Venus cradled in flowers."

"How do you come to be here at all?" asked Romana, attempting to mask a momentary confusion by raising her hands to her disordered hair.

"I come from my patient whom I have been visiting. Hearing that the Countess, who wishes to drive home, was wringing her hands over your non-appearance, I volunteered to search for you—a simple solution of the problem, surely?"

They were moving in the direction of the house when Romana said abruptly:

"I wonder what it must feel like to believe?"

"To believe what?"

"What these women here all seem so sure of—that there is another world after this one."

"It must feel rather comfortable, I think. I don't see how people who get nothing out of this life could manage to keep up their spirits at all unless they hoped to make up for lost time in some other. These convents are a grand institution for the nerves, I can assure you."

"They seem to me rather like a haven," said Romana, abstractedly.

"They are a haven—but only for wrecks."

"And yet it is quieter here than on the open sea."

The doctor gave her a penetrating side glance.

"You are not quite yourself to-day, Countess. At your age even the roughest sea is generally pre-

ferred to the most comfortable haven. To me it is plain that you are either over-tired, or else—"

"Or else, what?"

"Or else unhappy," he said rather lower.

Romana moved on more quickly, hoping to hide the wave of blood that had rushed over her neck and face. Had it come to this already?—that she was formally recognised as a neglected wife, open to be condoled with?"

"I advise you to conclude that I am over-tired," she said, with her head a little higher than usual. "To-morrow, no doubt, the open sea will have resumed all its charms in my eyes."

CHAPTER V.

DATING from the day of the visit to Saint Ursula, Romana's intercourse with the doctor imperceptibly slipped into a new groove. That he should have guessed that her life was a failure rather touched her, while the thought that he attributed the failure to a totally false cause stung her to the quick. He might imagine what he liked, only not that she was pining her heart out for a worthless husband. On this point, at least, she must attempt to disillusion him, even at the risk of becoming more intimate with the man than might be convenient later on—for she had early begun to suspect that he was very willing to comfort her in her semi-abandonment. It was a position which every woman recognises as perilous when another woman is concerned, but which each one feels quite sure of being able to grapple with personally. Romana, while giving herself a certain amount of rein, did so with open eyes, never for a moment doubting her power of being able to pull up at any given moment. This harmless little flirtation—if indeed a series of generally serious discussions deserved so flippant a name—fulfilled quite a number of objects. It stimulated an intellect always eager for exercise, it helped to while away the long, solitary summer months, while it proved to the world how

easily she could console herself for her husband's absences, and—last but not least—it visibly enraged her mother-in-law, whose lips were yet closed by the deficiencies in Wiktor's demeanour; for it was at this period that his genius for avoiding explanations and the adroitness with which he—eel-like—contrived to slip through the meshes of maternal supervision showed its highest development.

Besides all this it gave her the chance of satisfying a certain perplexed curiosity, still alive within her; for Romana was one of those women who, although persistently disappointed in Love, are yet as persistently attracted by its problems. The mortification of her failure had entered into her blood; irresistibly she felt drawn to discover its causes, and this undoubtedly she could best do by making further experiments with her power. Stung as she was by the infidelity of two men, she felt in no mood to be particularly sparing of the feelings of this one, who, moreover, was said to be so unscrupulous himself. If anything like Love really existed, and on this point she could come to no satisfactory conclusion with herself, then it should have been her right to be loved, supremely, devotedly, she told herself so every time she looked in her mirror. The homage of the other sex should have been no more than a tribute due to her beauty, and yet she had not been able to keep one man faithful to her!

There was no denying, either, that the man who had offered himself as the most convenient subject to experiment upon interested her more than any man she had ever met, not excepting that faithless

one who had touched her heart, without rousing her intellect. It was to her intellect and to some extent to her nerves that the doctor appealed, and not at all to her heart; but exactly for this reason he had greater chances in his favour. If he had attempted to woo her in anything like the same fashion that the others had wooed her she would have tired of him at once, for she was sick of ardour and soft glances. It was his measured coolness, the quiet confidence of his demeanour which made its mark. The calm and, so to say, well-disciplined admiration of a man who never loses possession of himself is often more effective than the wildest extravagances of the sincere but tactless lover, implying, as it does, that the homage springs from no ephemeral impulse, but is the result of a well-weighed and well-considered judgment. Besides the tribute paid by one who was understood to be so fastidious in the matter of feminine attractions could not fail to act soothingly upon a wounded vanity. Although he had never said so in words and would probably never dare to say so—thus she persuaded herself—every one of his glances and every one of his gestures said to her discreetly and yet quite plainly: "You are beautiful, and therefore I am your slave." If at any moment she had read passion in his eyes she would have recoiled from him in disgust; but what she read was not passion, rather the calm appreciation of a connoisseur before a work of art. The attitude was new to her and all the more calculated to pique her interest. So reassuring did it prove that it was not until the

ummer was far advanced that Romana caught the irst glimpse of her danger.

The consciousness came to her one hot August evening as she leaned against the stone balustrade of the terrace, with Doctor Ligrinow beside her. There was no one ill in the house just now, but the doctor was inexhaustible in the matter of pretexts. To-day he had called in order to warn them that there was a dysentery epidemic in the village, and that therefore fruit should be eaten only in moderation. The doors of the big drawing-room stood wide open, and within two girl visitors, daughters of their nearest neighbour, were singing at the piano, while in a far corner the Countess exchanged social news with their mother. The two sisters had agreeable voices, passably trained, and the notes of the carefully studied songs and duets floating out into the tepid night undoubtedly added by another degree to its already palpable seduction.

"Not quite as good as the nightingales," the doctor pronounced, "but acceptable *faute de mieux.*"

Romana said nothing, listening immovable.

"Lehn deine Wang an meine Wang,
Dann fliessen die Thränen zusammen,
Undan mein Herz, drück fest Dein Herz
Dann schlagen zusammen die Flammen.
Und wenn in die grosse Flamme fliesst
Der Strom von unseren Thränen,
Undwenn mein Arm Dich gewaltig umschliesst
Sterb ich vor Liebes Sehnen!
Lehn deine Wang an meine Wang!"

With a thrill of astonishment she had recognised the verses whose glowing, despairing passion had, from the moment of her acquaintance with Heine, troubled her profoundly. Wedded to music their power seemed to her to become almost insupportable. Yes, that would have been her idea of Love, if Love had not been a mere phantasy.

"Good!" said the doctor beside her. "Only I wish they would give us something less depressing than Schumann. Ah, that is better!" as, after a pause, the first notes of a fresh air—a duet this time—came from within.

"Laisse que je respire
Le souffle parfumé
Qu' exhale ton sourire,
Ton doux sourire aimé.
Laisse que dans la mienne,
Ta main, ta blanche main,
Repose et m' appartienne,
Enfant, jusqu' à demain!
L'amour, sais tu
C'est la douce aurore,
La douce aurore
De nos beaux jours.
Aimer c'est vivre,
Aimons encore!
Aimer c'est vivre,
Aimons toujours!"

The air was too catching to be listened to indifferently, yet even while drinking in its exhilarating notes Romana felt dimly that the other song had

left behind it a pain which all the light-hearted audacity of this one was not able to efface.

"They are right!" said the doctor, beside her, as the last exultant chord died away.

She looked towards him; the habitual pallor of his face made it plainly visible even through the shadows.

"Who is right?"

"Those who say *'Aimer c'est vivre!'* Analyse life closely and what remains of it but the one supreme passion? Every other smaller enjoyment is only enjoyable because of its connection with the great one. It is for that that women dress themselves, it is for that that men educate themselves and strive for the first places in the world. That man and that woman have lived most who have drunk most deeply of the enchanted cup. What do you call those who reach their graves without having dared, from stupid scruples of conscience—let us say rather of conventionality—to do more than sip at the bowl? Ascetics? Heroes? I call them poor fools who have missed the object of themselves in the universe and of the universe itself."

Even now he spoke with no passion. The words might be portentous, but the tone was as well within his control as ever. Yet even the words alone were enough to keep Romana silent with astonishment for so long that the doctor asked:

"And you, Countess? What is your opinion of the song? Have you nothing to say about it?"

"The same thing I said of the nightingales: all lies!"

"It is to yourself that you are telling lies. You did not believe what you said then, and you do not believe it now."

He said it so quietly and so entirely without the shadow of a doubt that Romana remained dumb.

"By what right," he pursued with an inflection of sternness in his voice, "do you alone set yourself up to deny the existence of a sentiment to which humanity bows? What can your experiences weigh against those of the world?"

"I am not alone, and even you and even the people who write such songs as 'Aimer c'est vivre!'—although they are ready at any moment to swear allegiance to their god, never dream of considering the oath binding. *'Jusqu' à demain'* this one says, you can hear it for yourself."

"That can only be the fault of the woman. Why is she not fascinating enough to keep him in permanent chains? For a woman not lavishly equipped with charms such adventures are always risky; it is only the queens of creation who can feel absolutely safe. Let her be but beautiful enough and it will not be *'jusqu' à demain,'* but *'jusqu' à la mort!'* "

Through the dim light Romana could feel his eyes full upon her, seeming with their steady and penetrating glance to complete the words just spoken. A shiver of excitement ran over her as she leaned a little more heavily against the broad balustrade.

"Your theories are convenient, at any rate for the men," she said, clearly aware all the time that the

tools between her hands had remarkably sharp edges, but perhaps for this very reason unable to lay them aside just yet. "But how about the women? What is to become of those unfortunate ones whose charms have not sufficed to forge those permanent chains you speak of, and whom the inconstancy of men leave lying in the mud, to be trodden on by whoever passes by?"

"That you should even put the question, Countess, speaks of your charitable heart. You try to put yourself in imagination in the place of your less fortunate sisters, and that is distinctly kind of you; but really the case does not call for so much compassion. Think of the plight of that great mass of merely pretty women if men were all at once to become so sternly virtuous as rigorously to pass them by for fear of a possible inconstancy? It is I who ask you: What is to become of them then? Is it not better merely to taste of the enchanted cup than to die without knowing its flavour? Ask your sisters themselves, and even though their poor hearts may be slightly battered they will answer you: *'Aimer c'est vivre.'* And as for the mud—what is mud, after all? Have you ever thought of analysing it? Water and earth—those are its component parts, two of the vital elements of Nature. Things that are absolutely clean in themselves, and the combination of which only our imagination vilifies. Honestly, I should not have expected you to adopt so purely conventional a mode of expression."

"Why not me more than any one else?" she asked inadvertently.

"Because you do not seem to me made of quite the same stuff as the majority of your sisters, of whom conventionality has so successfully narrowed the views upon questions which Nature originally planned on so different a scale. More than once I have heard you utter your contempt of empty forms so vigorously that, rightly or wrongly, I take you to be one of those women who are able to live without them, if need be."

The words might have been nothing in themselves, but there was about them a certain deliberation which set Romana thinking. Whatever they might mean they had obviously not been spoken at random. With a sudden sense of danger close at hand she raised herself from her bending posture.

"I have been living without them for the last hour, it seems to me," she said with an uneasy laugh, as she turned towards the open door. "Empty form would certainly have demanded of me to look after our visitors long ago. Really it is high time to shew them my face again," and lightly she passed into the lighted room.

* * * * * * *

Next day, greatly to Countess Sobolewska's surprise and somewhat to her relief, Romana announced her intention of paying a visit to her father. Considering that she had not seen him since her marriage there was really nothing astonishing about the desire she expressed, except perhaps its suddenness. On the previous evening the plan had not even been in her mind, but various reflections made during a somewhat disturbed

night had showed her this course as apparently the simplest solution of her present difficulty. That she could not again be alone with the doctor without his making to her a declaration of some sort she felt almost sure; to cut that declaration short would of course not be difficult, but would almost necessarily entail the breaking off of a friendship which was by far the most salient interest in her present life. It would be more convenient not to meet him again for some little time, a few weeks at least, after which interval the taking up again of their intercourse on a fresh and less perilous footing ought not to be impossible.

"Yes, I had better go," said Romana to herself, as in the small hours of the morning sleep at last drew near. "It will spare him the humiliation of a rejection in words; he is clever enough to understand without that."

The thought that he should, after all, be audacious enough to utter that declaration awoke in her alarm, but scarcely indignation. She felt too clearly aware of having brought this on herself to feel capable of throwing herself into the attitude of injured virtue. This she told herself sincerely; but what she did not tell herself was that if she determined on such rapid flight it was not entirely because of the wish to spare the doctor's feelings, but also because of an uneasy inner consciousness that that mortally pale face with the black eyes, that quiet masterfulness of manner, had taken a certain hold upon her imagination which she would gladly be rid of.

CHAPTER VI.

LYCZYN had no railway station, but for some years past Rostok had boasted of one, a quite third-rate little station indeed, into which only rare and extremely leisurely trains ever ran or rather sauntered, and forming the terminus of the small local line—which like a solitary arm stretched timidly into these mountainous regions, but nevertheless significant as being the one connecting link with the outer world. In Thomasz Morawek's eyes the station was the single object of interest contained within the sister towns. Ever since it had come into existence he had made it his habit to visit it daily during that one hour of exercise which he rigorously assigned to himself as necessary to health. The hour after his midday meal was fortunately the one at which one of the rare trains arrived, a spectacle which in itself was neither exciting nor lively, but which was yet the nearest available satisfaction for one of the cravings within him. With his stick planted before him and his hands crossed on the top, he would stand day after day on the edge of the small platform gazing up the one line of rails which, pitiably narrow though it was, yet formed the precious thread which bound him to better things. Over there, far beyond where the shine of the iron lost itself in the distance, was an-

other train and other people; people with ideas in their head instead of prejudices. That was his real home, and those were his true kin, not these thick-headed provincials, good only to fill his pockets with the small coin which time and patience turned into big banknotes. Even the gim-crack, little station house, with its red tin roof and its miniature waiting-room, possessed a mysterious beauty in his eyes, since it was the first landmark on the road that was to lead him to his paradise—the door through which he should escape one day from his prison.

And when at last the expected whistle was heard in the distance, Morawek could never quite lose the pleasurable emotion which the first sight of the engine turning a corner close at hand always brought with it. Incompetent and feeble though it was among its class, antiquated in its form, and for this very reason banished from busier lines, it nevertheless did belong to its class, and merely to see its wheels revolving and its pistons working and its steam escaping had an exhilarating and at the same time a comparatively awe-inspiring effect upon the man for whom this caricature of an engine was the nearest representative procurable of his idol —human progress.

It would not be very long now before he went through the door to the freedom outside. By rights he should have been there already, for the two years of which he had spoken to Romana were more than complete, yet the million was not yet so, principally owing to the unavoidable expenses which her marriage had entailed and which had forced him, with

a heavy heart, to disturb the symmetry of the packets within the safe. He had given her no portion—none had been asked for—but it was imperative that she should enter her husband's house equipped as befitted her new rank. Not that in his innermost heart Morawek felt the smallest respect for rank *per se;* it belonged, on the contrary, to that old-world lumber which he considered infallibly doomed, but since the institution was not yet extinguished and seemed likely not to have done dying its hard death before he himself died it was only reasonable to temporise with the idea and draw whatever profit from it that there might be to draw. In truth, although the marriage was sociably far more brilliant than any he had contemplated, Romana's choice had not by any means satisfied the notary. What he would have greatly preferred to a man of fashion would have been a man of learning, of science; a man ready to take an active part in the improvement of the world; one with whom he could have shared his ideas and against whose wits he could have whetted his own; whereas the first five minutes' conversation he had had with Wiktor had sufficed to engender in his mind a feeling of almost pitying contempt for the intellect of his future son-in-law. Nevertheless he made no difficulties. After the fright he had had only a few months earlier, and in view of a danger not yet definitely averted, he had almost thankfully accepted this compromise with Fate. No dream, after all, is ever quite perfect in its realisation, and although some of the details would be different from

what he had painted them the main issue would not be appreciably changed. This elegant young Count would assuredly prove easier to handle than that obstinate and contradictious engineer. He would do, at any rate, for enjoying the lighter, more frivolous side of Modernity—the side that found its expression in horse races, opera balls and champagne suppers. He might even be useful as a guide in the intricacies of fashionable life, in which obviously he was an adept, while the notary himself revelled in the more serious issues, and Romana might divide herself at pleasure between both, for, of course, no sooner settled in Vienna he would arrange for the young people to spend at least their winter in the capital. That part of the dream could not easily be relinquished; and he meant to be liberal. It was with a certain satisfaction that he had learned, through those private sources of information which are generally open to notaries, that the financial position of the Sobolewskis was not nearly so brilliant as appeared on the surface. The ruins of a princely fortune were there, but not very much more than the ruins, and although they would probably last the lifetime of the present owner, it was quite possible that he might yet find himself obliged to reduce his scale of expenditure. Curiously enough this discovery, instead of displeasing the notary, rather tended to raise his spirits. Although he had got to love money, it was chiefly his own money that he loved, and the thought that these aristocrats, who possibly imagined that they were conferring a favour, might yet be made to feel that they were re-

ceiving one, was eminently agreeable to his democratic form of vanity.

"They may think me a miser, but let the day but come on which that machine bears me finally away from here, and they shall see that I can spend money as regally as any count!" Thus he soliloquised one day in August as he stood at his post, gazing towards the labouring engine that with many prodigious puffs had rounded the corner.

The bell clanged out with unnecessary vehemence, the station-master donned his scarlet cap with equally superfluous haste, the solitary porter of the place got into position on the rather remote chance of there being a portmanteau to carry, while half a dozen Jews lounged on to the platform, hands in pockets, prepared to take stock of the arrivals with a view to some possible *"Geschäft"* to be made with somebody who might require either a conveyance or a five-florin note in a hurry. The arrivals were what interested Morawek the least about the whole affair; it was the working pistons that fascinated him, not the individuals in whose service they worked; also, no sooner had they come to a standstill than he turned, according to his habit, feeling that the performance was over for the day, and hobbled towards the entrance. Before he had gone two steps he was almost knocked down by the porter, making wildly for the solitary first-class compartment at whose window he had, to his boundless astonishment, recognised an occupant.

"Papa!" said a voice behind Morawek at the same moment, and, turning round, the notary saw

his daughter at not two paces from him, waving a smiling welcome with a hand gloved in Swedish leather.

"Romana! You! How—has anything happened? he almost stuttered, in the completeness of his astonishment.

"Nothing, except that Surowica was getting a little dull," she laughed, as she sprang to the ground, "and it occurred to me that I had not seen you for twenty-two months."

"But why not telegraph?"

"Because I like surprises, and I knew that Roza could get my bed ready before evening."

"Well, but the dinner? You might have warned me; I have dined already and I don't know what there is in the house."

"Enough to keep me from starvation, no doubt," she laughed again, but the notary's brow did not immediately clear as with perplexed eyes he contemplated her. Although this was undoubtedly his daughter it was also at the same time another person, unfamiliar, almost strange to him. Her tone and her bearing, the gesture with which she gave her orders to the porter, even the silver-grey dust-cloak which shimmered around her, all seemed to belong far more to the Countess Sobolewska than to his own child Romana. If Romana's regal style of beauty had wanted that particular stamp which the best social intercourse and nothing but it can give, it had now got the final touch it required. No man, not even men like Thomasz Morawek, is quite callous to such influences, and as he gazed at her

now and in spite of the old, careless tone of her words, the notary could not feel quite easy about that unprepared room and that unprovided dinner.

"You will want a carriage," he said, looking about him anxiously.

"No, no—no carriage; I want to walk. The man will bring my things. In one of those poky *fiacres* one sees nothing, and I want to take a review of the place as we go along. Are there many changes, I wonder?"

"Changes at Rostok!" said Morawek, in accents of unspeakable contempt.

"All the better! I like the old houses best. Come along, papa; I'll walk as slowly as you like."

As they went down the street by the river it was Romana who bore almost the entire brunt of the conversation, while the notary, limping alongside, could only glance at her at intervals with a pleasurable astonishment, for she was chattering almost as gaily as a child. The sight of her native mountains, of the Keremosz which had been as a companion to her since childhood, even of the once so familiar corners and byways, had for the moment put every other thought from her mind. She had not known how she loved them all until she saw them again.

"The Skriweks have painted their house red," she commented as they advanced; "it used to be green, and Daniel Stein has got a new shield to his shop, and, oh, *how* big the horse-chestnuts have grown in two years!"

They were half way down the street when from

behind a garden paling the sound of a crooning song reached her ears. She peered across curiously; a basket cradle upon wheels had been drawn up in the shadow of the bushes, and a woman in a peasant dress bent over it, uttering the monotonous and somewhat nasal lullaby. Romana, looking more keenly about her, felt a wave of blood surging to each of her temples. Yes, this was the Polinskis' house, which from the increased density of the bushes she had almost missed recognising, and that child could only be—

"Is Aniela here?" she asked quickly of her father.

"Aniela, your old friend? Yes, I believe she is staying with her mother."

"But I thought—"

"That her husband had been removed? So he has; he has a post at Stanislau now, but they have some idea about change of air for the baby, I suppose," and he gave his usual dry chuckle. He had given the information about Weber without the smallest embarrassment and without even taking the trouble to watch her expression very closely. *That* affair, surely, was over and done with long ago. The mere fact that Romana had of her own free choice married another man seemed to the notary to prove conclusively how wisely he had acted on a certain critical occasion, and sufficed to convince him that not even a meeting—although such was not likely—could now have any important consequences.

Romana had quickened her pace so perceptibly that her father was obliged to call out for mercy.

Of this danger she had not thought. She had imagined the Webers safely established in Stanislau, else she would scarcely have so easily decided upon this excursion. Upon her lips burned the question: "And he? Is he here, too?" but she could not bring herself to speak it; because she scorned to show even this much interest in him, she told herself, but in fact because she was not quite sure of her equanimity.

For the rest of the way she spoke little; the overflowing gaiety of her arrival had been abruptly extinguished.

At sight of her old home a third and different mood came over her, a sudden tightening and at the same time infinitely delicious melting of the heart in face of those small spaces which had once appeared to her so large, of the steep little garden with the crumbling wall at the base, and whose crooked paths and untrimmed bushes she now discovered quite to eclipse for her all the glories of the Surowica park. Long after dusk had fallen that evening, and while the notary—shut up in his office—was arduously making up for lost time, Romana might have been found visiting and revisiting one familiar spot after the other; treading and again treading the paths, the nooks, the open and the hidden spaces where for a few brief days—a few brief hours only—she had dreamed, she had loved and been happy. Oh, false dream! Oh, lost happiness! Oh, wasted love!

CHAPTER VII.

FROM the moment when she had caught sight of the basket-cradle within Madame Polinska's garden Romana had been burnt by a perfect flame of curiosity. Until she had seen the face of Aniela's child she knew that she would have no peace. To reach this object by direct means seemed to her impossible under the circumstances, so when several days had passed and the tormenting curiosity would not be still she began to consider what indirect ones were within reach.

By dint of reflection she had remembered that on the Rostok side of the river, and a little beyond the last houses of the town, there lay a peculiarly shady and inviting meadow upon which on hot afternoons almost the entire infant population of the town was to be found collected. Here they enjoyed the fragrance of the air that had travelled through so many miles of pine forest, and revelled in the softness of the green carpet so well calculated to be rolled upon. So much favoured was the spot on account of the many advantages it offered to extreme youth that it had long since been known as "The Garden of the Innocents." Thither Romana resolved to go on the chance of Aniela's baby being among the Rostok "Innocents," and even at the risk of encountering Aniela herself, for her desire to view the child closely was even greater than her dread of meeting the mother.

Alone she crossed the bridge—the second bridge which had been constructed since the flood which had settled her fate—and directed her steps towards the upper end of the town. The nearer she drew to the spot the more did the unrest within her grow. After all it was very likely that Aniela would be there; and if she were? A glance would surely reveal her presence, and in that case she could simply pass on, with her curiosity unsatisfied for to-day.

"The Garden of Innocents" had not changed its character since she remembered it. As of old it was dotted over with small encampments established on the grass in the shadow of the single pines that seemed to have advanced like the scouts of an army from the dense ranks of their comrades, descending the mountain side in a compact body. Bright frocks and pinafores everywhere, children munching bread and butter, and children playing at hide-and-seek between the trees, babies asleep in their perambulators or upon their nurses' lap—a mixed concert of gleesome laughter and of pitiful howls.

Among this crowd of babies how was she to identify the only one that interested her? It was only now that the difficulty of the undertaking burst upon Romana. These children were not labelled, and nearly every second nurse wore the peasant dress of the country. Already she had become unpleasantly aware of the sensation which her appearance was causing on the meadow: at every step she made she encountered the inquisitive stare of the children, the rather awe-stricken gaze of the at-

tendants, whose inexperience could not keep them from the instinctive conviction that neither that dress nor that hat belonged to either Rostok or Lyczyn.

If Aniela were here she could not be anywhere close at hand, a reflection which helped to keep up Romana's equanimity, as she slowly passed group after group, scanning the inmates of each perambulator and mentally guessing at their ages. "He cannot be a year old yet," she told herself, and wished she had a better idea of what size a child of one year might be expected to have attained. She had reached the edge of the forest, when from under the branches of a pine tree that hung, tent-like, almost to the ground, she heard that same crooning air which had attracted her attention the other day, and, stooping a little, saw the basket-carriage which had stood behind the garden paling. There was no one beside it except the peasant nurse whose friendly eyes met hers. On the instant her courage began to come back to her.

"This is—this is the grandchild of Madame Polinska?" she said, pushing a heavy branch aside as she drew near.

"Yes, Pani," said the woman, whose eyes were admiringly fixed upon the trimming of Romana's dress. "Does the Pani know my mistress?"

She showed her flashing teeth as she spoke; evidently it pleased her to think that her mistress should have such beautifully dressed acquaintances.

"I used to know her—before she was married. It is a boy, is it not?"

"A boy, Pani; and a fine one, everybody says."

Obviously this was the opening for a compliment, but Romana missed it. She was looking hard at the child, which while struggling valiantly to cram its bright red fist into its mouth, stared back at her with Felix's hazel eyes. They were still contemplating each other in silence, and although she had heard no step upon the soft moss, when Romana became aware of another presence beside her and turned to find herself looking into a once familiar face—a little older, a little fuller, but unmistakably the face of her old friend, seen last on that Pentecost eve while the storm was brewing overhead.

Often in these two years had Romana wondered how they two would meet, if ever again they were to meet; whether with the coldness of indifference or the heat of reproach and anger, but never had she painted to herself the meeting as it actually was. For the recognition was scarcely complete when, almost to her consternation, she felt Aniela's arms about her, exactly as of old, and grew breathless under the impetuosity of the embrace which showed her that these two years had changed her friend far less than herself. But in an instant Aniela had drawn back, looking at her with glistening yet affrighted eyes, as though rather alarmed at what she had done.

In the pause that followed each seemed to be rapidly taking stock of the situation, as well as of the changes in the appearance of the other, arriving at the common though undefined conviction that in

these two years they had grown more unlike each other than they had ever been before. Aniela was telling herself that although she could not imagine how that dress was made, it undoubtedly was the sort of dress that Romana ought to have worn long ago, the only sort worthy of her royal form, and it accorded her even a sorrowful satisfaction to see that beauty which she had always so passionately admired framed at last according to its due, while Romana was saying to herself that Aniela had grown a little stouter, a little more high-coloured, and a little less obviously neat in her appearance than she used to be. Was it possible that she herself had ever worn such gloves, or had been able to exist in a bodice cut in that fashion? All the kindliness and much of the brightness was still upon the small, dark face, but something of the birdlike grace was gone from the miniature figure.

A minute had not yet passed when Romana turned away without having spoken, but Aniela's fingers were upon her arm already. Love for the man whom they had both loved had not been able to kill in Aniela's heart the love for her rival—her unsuccessful rival, as she told herself with a mixture of exaltation and confusion, for to Aniela's humble little soul it had remained inexplicable that she should ever have succeeded in making Felix forget Romana.

"Not yet," she now pleaded. "I have yearned for a sight of your face for so long. Give me a few minutes only, Romana; there is so much I should like to say to you!"

She was drawing her deeper into the shade of the forest, away from the eyes and ears of the inquisitive nurse. And Romana had stopped resisting. Although she might tell herself that this woman had been the cause of her deepest humiliation, once having met her eyes—those so obviously honest eyes that had never yet cheated her and never yet mocked her when others did so—she discovered to her astonishment that she could not hate her. A thousand old influences were weaving their nets about her as by the side of Felix Weber's wife she trod the smooth forest floor. Romana herself looked straight in front of her, down the rows of pine trees that melted into the depths of the forest, but she could feel her friend's eyes upon her as of old, and presently, as of old, there came one of those bursts of naïve admiration which had so often made her smile.

"Oh, Romana, how beautiful you are! I thought you could not be more beautiful than you were two years ago, but you have succeeded. You are more beautiful than—than yourself! No, you never could have remained buried at Lyczyn,—but why had you to be so cruel?"

"It would have been more cruel if I had allowed him to hope on without reason," said Romana, almost quietly. It was Michal whom Aniela was speaking of, of course, and to perceive that the conversation was taking this—to her—indifferent turn helped to calm the intolerable agitation of her nerves.

"But you had given him reason to hope; it was

that that was so cruel, and which might so easily have wrecked his life. Of course you never loved him, but he is not a man to change so quickly. He has suffered much, ah, so much! There have been moments when I almost despaired of comforting him."

There was to Romana something so unexpected in this combination of her small, neat admirer of other days and this apparently so tragical despair that she actually laughed, struck only by the ludicrous side the position.

"Really, Aniela, I had no idea I was doing anything so dreadful. His excitement about me always struck me as belonging to the order of inevitable youthful complaints, as inevitable as whooping-cough or measles and as harmless too as those things generally are."

Aniela's reproachful eyes became indignant. "Oh, Romana, how changed you are! How hard-hearted you have become in your great world! He has told me everything, for we have no secrets. I love him—oh, with all my heart! And yet I would rather have lost him than that he should suffer what you have made him suffer! I swear to you that if I could have gained you back for him two years ago when he came to me with the wound all fresh and bleeding I would have done so. Perhaps it was stupid of me, but it is the only way in which I can understand love."

Romana stood still, her amazed eyes full upon her companion.

"Is it not Michal you are speaking of?" she asked slowly.

"Michal! Romana, you are laughing at me now! Your own conscience must tell you that I am speaking of Felix."

"And you call me cruel to *him?*"

"Only to him. See here, Romana, I am happy now and he, too, is growing happy, thanks to Time and to our little one, and yet I cannot quite forgive you the pain which you caused him."

Romana was walking on again now, and again staring down the dim rows of pine trees, but her neck had just perceptibly stiffened and her upper lip protruded disdainfully.

"He was in a great hurry, at any rate, to be cured of that pain," she said with difficulty, while it seemed to her that the bitterness in her heart must surely be distorting her features. "Even supposing he had got no answer, would it have been beneath his dignity to ask his question over again?"

"But he did get your answer, Romana. I saw the note myself—it was exactly that which broke him down."

"He did get my answer?" Romana said, in a tone which struck herself as one of merely stupid repetition, and her eyes—full of something like terror—turned once more upon her friend; "but then—I don't understand."

"You *must* have seen what he felt for you," Aniela pursued, too much embarked on the flood of her own emotions to take notice of the strange perplexity of the other; "and if you felt nothing for him you should have acted differently from the first, you should not have given him that flower,

you should not have stayed in the summer-house that day before the storm. Of course, with your looks you had the right to think of a better marriage. I am not angry with you for being ambitious, but for playing with him as you did, and then dismissing him with a few words."

Romana could not answer at once. About her forehead and temples she was aware of a sensation of cold, as though that particular chill perspiration which moral as well as physical fear is apt to engender were breaking out there, while over her heart—beating so tumultuously a minute ago—a horrible stillness seemed to be descending. What ghastly misunderstanding was there here? With her brows painfully drawn together as though attempting to solve a hard riddle, gnawing unconsciously at the white edge of her veil, she walked on straight in front of her, heedless now of Aniela's presence, heedless of the rough trunks against which she came near to brushing her lightly clad shoulders, or of the roots and twigs upon which the delicate fabric of her summer dress caught again and again. She was sure of nothing yet, but the outline of a possibility—a possibility which made her feel physically faint for a moment—had presented itself to her mind. "Dismissed him in a few words." Why, that was exactly what she had done to Michal!

"Are you sure you are not speaking of your brother?" she asked again, and yet scarcely heeded Aniela's answer, whose meaning only reached her understanding rather than its words. The features

of that grim possibility were beginning to grow so plain as to make it almost into a probability. After all, she had heard before of letters exchanged by mistake. She herself had once had some disagreeables because of a note intended for a dressmaker being put into an envelope addressed to a grocer, and *vice versa*. Turning her thoughts back to the disturbance and confusion of that Pentecost Sunday, to the fear she had been in of missing the post, and to the haste with which she had despatched Roza, such an accident was not at all unlikely to have happened, for she remembered distinctly now that she had written no name inside either of the letters. The convulsive inclination to laugh made her throat feel horribly tight for a moment; was the whole thing not rather like some colossal, some heart-rending joke? One moment of inattention, the mistake of only a gesture, and a whole life—two whole lives changed as result! But then—her thoughts flew on—if Felix had got Michal's note, the logical deduction was that Michal had got Felix's, and that note had been plainly an invitation: how was it then that she had not heard more of her so aggressive admirer? That part had been a-wanting to make the joke perfect. For the moment she could thing of no explanation; there was something here that she did not understand.

"Is your brother at Rostok?" she asked abruptly, just as Aniela was beginning to wonder at her silence.

"Yes, the vacations are not yet over, you know."

"Tell him to come and see me to-morrow; I have

something to ask him." Then, as Aniela, surprised, did not immediately reply, "or are you perhaps afraid that I shall turn his head?"

"Oh, Romana, what an idea!" said Aniela, becoming unexpectedly a little embarrassed. "Of course I shall send him to you if you care to see him again, and of course he will be glad to go; but, as to turning his head, you must know that his head is no longer free to be turned, he—he has been engaged to Basia Marecz since Easter."

"He, too!" said Romana, with a sudden, hard laugh. "Well, send him to me and I will congratulate him."

Aniela, left standing alone under the pine trees, watching the spots of sunlight from between the branches gliding over the retreating figure of her friend like discs and bars and arrows of gold, felt that it would be no use to call her back. To what was passing in Romana's mind she had no clue, nor the subtlety of spirit necessary to unravel so tangled a psychological skein. Romana had always been a little incomprehensible to her simple habits of thought, something to be wondered at rather than examined closely, and the present riddle was no more astonishing than many in former days.

That her dearest bosom friend should have been pushed by ambition into downright heartlessness had been, so far, the most serious sorrow of Aniela's life, not diminished by the fact that to this act of heartlessness she owed her own happiness. She had said no more than the truth when she had told Romana that if two years ago she had had the chance

of making the supreme sacrifice she would have made it, for Love had always appeared to Aniela to be not so much a rightful source of happiness to herself as an opportunity for causing the happiness or healing the unhappiness of him whom, with all the strength of her candid and devoted soul she loved.

When Felix had come to her, smarting under the first sting of the indignity done to him, and in this early stage of his disappointment more angry than unhappy, and when he had with a certain bitter vehemence, whose cause she guessed, asked her to be his wife, she had even in the height of her astonishment instinctively refused.

"You do not love me," she had said, looking straight into his eyes, which she could see were shining with indignation against the other woman and not with tenderness for herself. "I know that your heart belongs to some one else."

He had answered with protestations that it was not so. That he had been dazzled for a brief moment he did not deny, that too great beauty joined to a manner too seductive had caused him to stray from the path he had originally traced for himself, he confessed to her, but that that path had led straight to her and not to the other he swore in perfect good faith, as also that he had now come back penitent, never again to be tempted from his loyalty.

Then, as she still hesitated, imagining that perchance only some trivial misunderstanding was at work and shrinking from the thought of a possible treachery to her friend, Felix had pulled out the

note received on the previous evening from Romana and had put it into her hands, saying:

"There, read that for yourself, and see whether anything can change that!"

With rising and ebbing colour she read. Sorrowful indignation had been her first feeling. Was this Romana—*her* Romana? But swiftly upon it had come profound pity for him. Although to the grace of a bird Aniela—as far as penetration of thought was concerned—might be said to join not much more than the brains of a bird, that womanly instinct which has nothing to do with reason found its way here at once. He might talk as he liked about his pride, she knew quite well that it was his heart that was hit. He might protest of his perfect cure, but she saw plainly that the cure was not even begun, and it was exactly the thought that if no one undertook it he might yet succumb to his despair which tempted her. He required consolation, that was clear, and instinctively she knew herself an adept at consolation. And, after all, there always remained the possibility of doing even more than merely consoling him, since there is scarcely any miracle which a love as true as her own cannot work. With this hope in her mind she yielded.

At first she had feared that her hopes were not going to be fulfilled. With pain she had watched those battles of the soul which he attempted to conceal from her, yet ineffectually. If it had not been for the child she sometimes told herself that she must have failed; but the advent of the child had in one day altered the situation. Men like Felix, who

are good from instinct rather than from conviction, are too full of the healthy impulses of Nature to be able to hold out long against its most direct appeals. He had been an attentive and conscientious husband—no more—but he became in one hour an enthusiastic father. From that moment Aniela had felt safe, so safe that the reappearance of Romana, although arousing floods of emotion, never for a moment appeared to her in the light of a danger. She had read too few novels and knew too little of life—the life that lay beyond the limits of her busy little household—to be able fully to realise that such dangers can ever become acute. To a mind trained in such pure and primitive lines marriage bore a character of finality which completely isolates the half of the life that lies before it from the half that lies after. If it had not been so it was not likely that even on the impulse of a reproach which had so long waited for utterance she would have said every word that she had spoken to Romana that afternoon.

* * * * * * *

While Aniela was thoughtfully retracing her steps, Romana, rapidly traversing the meadow, had regained the road that led back to the town. She walked with her veil down, her teeth still unconsciously tormenting its edge, her brows still drawn into that frown of almost laborious reflection, inattentive to her surroundings until upon the deserted road she became aware of a man walking towards her. He was too far off still for his features to be distinguishable, but in the moment that her eyes

fell upon his powerful frame—so squarely conspicuous against the evening sky—her pulses had begun to gallop. A few minutes ago with Aniela in the forest she had felt the mad desire to put that question which she had not dared to put on the day of her arrival: "Is he here?" but again had found it to be impossible. Now she had her reply. He was here, on his way evidently to rejoin his wife, and he would be forced to pass her by close in another minute. What took place in her mind during that brief minute of preparation was only a chaos of impressions, a shooting past of mere fragments of thought, of attempts at resolutions, the sense of which was rendered unintelligible to herself by the noise of her pulses in her ears. Often she had imagined such a meeting, and always had seen herself measuring him with that regally distant gaze of which she knew herself capable. Even ten minutes ago she would still have succeeded, she did not doubt it, but that was before her ideas had been upset by Aniela's unconscious revelations, and as yet she had had no time to rearrange them upon this new basis. Was it possible to look at him as a traitor should be looked at when, after all, it might yet appear that he was not a traitor, or not so black a one as she had supposed—guilty of overhaste rather than of deliberate betrayal? All these questions had so unsteadied her nerves as to render the glance which she irresistibly turned upon him as he approached, wavering and uncertain, instead of coldly condemning. And what she saw on his face now, close at hand, was not calculated to diminish her

agitation, for this surely was not the face of a traitor, this pallid countenance so obviously undone by what had evidently been an absolute surprise, and with eyes that looked at her with such wild, such despairing reproach. In his absorption he would probably have given no conventional sign of recognition had not Romana—herself flurried into forgetting whose place it was to move first—rapidly and silently inclined her head in the moment that they were abreast of each other, with only the breadth of the road between them. Then, with the stiffness and precision of one of those mechanical toys that act in obedience to a spring, he had raised his hat straight from his head, and after that one moment, during which the eyes of each had seemed to plunge into the very depths of the other, they had passed on their way, silent, but with bursting hearts.

CHAPTER VIII.

ROMANA walked home without relaxing her pace and without daring to glance behind her. There was only one coherent thought in her mind just now: He loves me still! But, although there was exultation in it, it did not consist of exultation alone. In this first moment she was even aware of a shade of resentment against him for thus upsetting the theories which she had so carefully constructed for herself and forcing her to reconsider certain questions from a quite new point of view, or rather from a very old one which she had believed herself to have quite abandoned.

Arrived at home, she stopped only to throw off her hat and her gloves, and went out again into the garden, for the evening was close and her head ached with thinking.

What exactly had there been in that note intended for Michal? It had been a note of dismissal, of course, but the precise terms had long escaped her memory. They had appeared so unimportant then, they had acquired so unexpected an importance now. The time that must pass before Michal's visit appeared to her all at once insupportably long; she wished she had told Aniela to send him in the morning, for Rostok etiquette would probably prompt him to choose the afternoon. Would she be able to wait so long before getting the last word

of the mystery whose existence she already guessed, without having a suspicion of its nature?

She was descending the steep path in the midst of her reflections—the impatience in her heart made it difficult to remain still—and without any thought having shaped itself in her mind she yet knew that it was her old post by the wall towards which something was drawing her, which seemed to be calling out for her presence. She had scarcely reached it and thrown a searching glance up the road when already she knew why she had come, for there—not six paces off—was Felix Weber, slowly coming down the road. A momentary giddiness seized her and then passed, leaving her this time frankly exultant and yet frightened. "He has not been able to stay away, he has followed me instead of going to his wife." The thought went through her mind, as did also the observation that he was coming not from the side of the town but from the opposite direction, which meant, of course, that he had been past the wall at least once already. He had come probably with no other thought but that of having one glimpse of her in passing, in the steep little garden whose higher levels were so plainly visible from the road. Could she accord him more than a glimpse? She asked herself the question with inward breathlessness during the few seconds that were left her for decision. She had not yet told herself in so many plain words that she still loved this man as completely, as enthusiastically as she had loved him in the early days of her girlhood, but she was aware principally of a tyrannical

desire to justify herself in his eyes, to say some word which would convince him that she was not the woman without heart and without faith for which he evidently took her, for which he *must* take her if the notes had actually been exchanged. Of what such an explanation must lead to she had not yet begun to think and had no time to think now, for he was close already, and obviously had no intention of addressing her. He could not pretend not to see her, but with that same automatic gesture which she had seen once to-day, he lifted his hat and would have passed on had not Romana at that moment said, with a good deal less than her usual assurance:

"Good-evening, Herr Weber."

Then he stood still, all of a piece, looking rather wooden, as it struck Romana, even in the midst of her own nervousness. A few moments passed before she spoke again, and during which he waited stolidly, not looking at her, but at the wall.

"I saw Aniela this afternoon: she is looking very well, I think."

After all she had not the courage to say any word which would be a direct allusion to the past.

"Yes, she is quite well," he said, looking up now, perforce, but at her dress, at her hair, at anything but her eyes.

"How does she like Stanislau?"

"She likes it well enough, but of course the Rostok air is better for her."

"Yes; she is used to the mountains. Stanislau is so flat."

Now that some sort of a talk had been begun Romana was regaining a little of her self-control, just enough to let her make some hurried observations; and the first she made was that that joyous light which had seemed to tell of some overflowing inner happiness, and which in former days had puzzled and even provoked her, no longer looked out of the hazel eyes. Though he might still have sources of happiness within him it would never again be in so lavish a measure, his joy of life would never again be forced to look out by his eyes, but would henceforward be amply housed in his soul. It was a change which, despite the possible compliment to her vanity which it contained, yet cut her to the quick as she looked on that face which she had known so young only two years ago, and which now was older than its age, both thinner and browner and a trifle harder. It was an improvement, and at the same time a loss, for, although the face had gained by having a history in it, it had lost by that indefinable charm of untouched youthfulness, to which her own untouched and youthful heart had so spontaneously gone out. Yes, he was different from himself as she had known him—a difference that his present constraint of manner unduly accentuated—and different also from the men she had seen about her these two years; different in his bearing, in his clothes, in the absence of those subtleties of manner and empty elegancies of gesture to which she had grown used and of which she was surfeited. Probably she would require time to

get accustomed to the idea of this new Felix, so, at least, she told herself, even while aware in her deepest heart that it was but the old Felix after all, and still holding her in the old thrall.

They exchanged a few more phrases before the inevitable moment came at which it seemed that neither of them could think of a single platitude more to say; and, conscious probably of the inconveniences of even the smallest silence, Felix raised his hat again and resumed his walk, somewhat in a hurry. In another moment he would be gone beyond recall, and with him perhaps her one chance of justifying herself, since it was possible that they would never meet again. Romana told herself this as she watched him approaching the corner, and the pulses in her head recommenced their hammering.

"Herr Weber!" she said, before she knew that she meant to speak, but so low and uncertainly that he did not hear; then a little louder:

"Herr Weber!"

He stopped, without immediately turning, then slowly came back towards her.

"You called me?" he asked coldly.

"Only to ask a question. Tell me, have you a very bad opinion of me?"

Her eyes were almost humble, even though she had succeeded in infusing a shade of playfulness into the tone. It was the one best calculated to take the edge off the situation, she felt. He was standing straight below the wall now, and she could

see how a very slight shudder passed over him, the sort of shudder which a man with a wound may give when a finger has been laid upon it.

"Of what value can my opinion be to you—Countess?" he said, looking at her full this time.

It was she who bent her head now before the proud reproach of his gaze, and before that word which, coming from his lips, touched her like an insult.

"No one wants to be judged falsely," she said, still striving to keep the gravest tones out of her voice. "Tell me only this: Did you get a note from me two years ago?"

This time he flushed with the genuine red of anger and moved a step away from the wall.

"This may amuse you, but it does not amuse me. I have said 'good-evening' once: allow me to go."

"One moment only," she pleaded, seeing only her vanishing opportunity. "What was there written in that note?"

Weber had stopped again and was looking at her in amazed silence, rather white about the lips.

"It is you who ask me this?"

"Yes; I want to know; I *have* to know!"

"I can show you what was written," he said, with an unexpected smile that touched her more painfully than his coldness; and before her astonished eyes he put his hand into an inside pocket, and pulling out a battered pocket-book—one of those big, plain pocket-books which engineers find useful—he proceeded deliberately to search among its contents.

"Here!" he said, after a moment. "I have made it a rule to carry it about with me; it's a good plan for keeping one's memory alive, you know; as valuable as a talisman, in fact," and he laughed, not as he used to laugh long ago.

Romana, without speaking, took the paper he was holding up towards her. It was much folded and creased, also somewhat stained, but the first glance showed her her own handwriting. Leaning sideways against the wall, in order to catch the waning light upon the page which, with cold fingers, she had unfolded, she read:

"It is best to be frank even at the risk of hurting you, and to tell you at once that this can go no further, since I cannot feel for you anything more than friendship. I fear you will be disappointed, and if by any word or look of mine I have awakened in you a false impression, I hope you will forgive me. For the future we can be no more than acquaintances.

"ROMANA MORAWEK."

Yes, those were undoubtedly her own words: they came back to her now without the possibility of a doubt.

Having come to the last word she remained so long without moving out of her position that Felix asked impatiently:

"Are you done? Can I have it back again?"

"It is a mistake," she said, without looking up from the paper.

"Do you deny your own writing?"

"No, that I don't deny. And you say this was addressed to you? No, don't speak!" she added

quickly, seeing how the blood began again to mount in his face. "I must believe that it was addressed to you since it is in your hands that I find it, but it was not written to you; that is all I ask you to believe. This was written to some one else; to you I wrote—differently."

"If you would explain—"

He was still watching her mistrustfully, but his face was already troubled.

"I cannot explain," she said, the irrepressible excitement beginning to rise at last. "I understand nothing as yet, except that there has been some horrible mistake. I never wrote this to you—never!—never! I do not remember what I wrote exactly, but it was to tell you to come here, to this very wall and fetch your answer for yourself!"

"Romana!" cried Felix, sharply, and then stopped short, startled by the sound of his own voice; for, although the road was deserted, since this was a week-day, and there was no *Mai Andacht* at this season, he could not help remembering that he was on a public thoroughfare. He stretched up his hands vaguely towards the top of the wall, as though groping for something, but he met nothing but the crumbling stones. Romana was again staring with knitted brow at the paper in her hand.

"I cannot understand yet how I came to exchange the notes," she was saying, in deep abstraction. "And there are other things, too, that I do not understand; but to-morrow perhaps I shall. If you come back to-morrow perhaps I can explain.

I do not want you to think too badly of me; but leave me now, please leave me. I have so many things to think about!"

She spoke with signs of fatigue in her tone and about her whole person, and the last words were spoken already in going. Behind her she heard Felix's voice, wild with perplexity, and with the passion that was breaking bounds at last, pleading for one moment more, one word more of enlightenment.

"Romana, Romana!" the whisper pursued her in accents that pierced to the bottom of her sensibilities. But she would not listen. It was not only that she was really tired out with emotions which had been too much for one day, but she was also a little afraid if she allowed herself to be retained beside that wall of what the next minutes might possibly bring. A vision of Aniela's so tender and trusting face had passed before her, and was still beside her as she mounted the path towards the house, with a haste that almost resembled flight.

CHAPTER IX.

NEXT afternoon had come, a hot and heavy afternoon as they had all been lately, and Romana, wrapped in a cool and flowing white gown, sat alone in the little drawing-room, of which the big piano in the corner took up nearly a quarter of the space. It was also the only object of any interest which the room contained, for neither the oil prints on the walls —ornaments dating from the time of Thomasz Morawek's father—nor the very aged photograph albums on the table were especially calculated to raise the spirits of a visitor, supposing that such ever came here. It was one of those rooms whose very smell, that of musty leather and rarely opened windows, betray that they are not rooms at all, in the ordinary human acceptation of the term, but chambers of reception in which nobody ever is received and in which nothing is alive except an occasional feather broom.

But to-day, after many—oh, so many days!—a visitor had been across that threshold. Romana, sitting alone upon the stiff sofa whose springs had grown rusty for want of being sat on, was still looking at the door by which he had just gone out again —looking fixedly and thinking with all her might about what, within the last minutes, had come to her knowledge.

It had been almost amusing to see Michal's entry, and if only her thoughts had been a little more disengaged she would undoubtedly have got some entertainment out of watching the mixture of embarrassment and jauntiness with which her quondam admirer—attired in the tail-coat and spotless shirt which his *savoir-vivre* had considered imperative, and holding a faultless *claque* under his arm—had approached her, half ready rather defiantly to apologise for having found it possible to console himself, and more than half awed by her elevation in the social scale. Even to see Michal with a moustache would have made her laugh under happier circumstances, for his moustache was exactly what she would have expected it to be—as small and as neat as his whole dapper person.

But at her first word, following on the greeting, the jauntiness and the defiance had been completely swallowed up in confusion. Had he or had he not received a note from her two years ago? she imperiously asked, and he stuttered submissively and a little reproachfully that, No—she had not done him the honour of writing.

"Think well," she said, with an urgency which puzzled him not a little. "You heard nothing from me at all after that day in the garden—before the thunder-storm,—you remember?"

Of course he remembered, better with every moment that he found himself sitting in this small, hot room, a narrow table only between him and this marvellous woman whom he had once dared to love.

"From you, not—" he murmured.

"But what?" she asked, understanding from the inflection in his voice that the phrase was not finished.

"From your father."

She sat up very slowly on the sofa. "From my father?"

"Yes, I imagine that you had complained to him of that—of that little indiscretion of mine; but it was not necessary, I assure you, and it would have been kinder of you to give me my dismissal yourself rather than expose me before Pan Morawek."

He was tormenting his *claque* now, turning it almost spitefully between his lavender-gloved little hands. It would seem that even the blonde charms of Basia Marecz had not quite succeeded in healing the sting of that distant humiliation.

"Go on," she said, moving only her lips. "What did he say?"

"What you told him to say, I suppose: that having learnt that I had been incommoding his daughter—yes, *incommoding* was the word he used—with the expression of my affection, he took this opportunity of signifying to me that both his daughter and he would be much obliged if I were to cease attentions that were not desired; that sort of thing, you know," and the small black eyes grew bright with resentment.

Romana looked at him with sudden severity.

"You are sure you know my father's handwriting?"

"Every one in Rostok and Lyczyn knows it, surely; and besides there was his name."

"And after that you went away?"

"Of course I did, since I saw that there was no more hope for me."

Not very much had been said beyond that, nor had Romana attempted to detain her visitor, whose mixed emotions had pressed him to beat a hasty retreat. She had learned from him all that he knew, and beyond that she had no use for him. And now he was gone, and she sat alone in the stuffy little drawing-room, staring at the door he had closed behind him and yet not thinking of him at all. Her face was almost blank, but behind it her brain worked furiously. As she lay back on the sofa, her two hands hanging beside her, palms upward, she seemed only to be overpowered with the heat; but it was nothing physical which weighed upon her, it was something moral. Again she was thinking—thinking with all the powers of her soul, straining the threads of memory until it seemed as though they must snap in the effort to bring back the smallest details of that far-off day on which everything had happened. She had been in the garden, that she knew; two or three times, she was not sure which, but certainly between the writing of the letters and the despatching of them, for she remembered the hurry in which she had returned to give them to Roza. There had been the bird's nest,—that too she remembered,—but where exactly it had come in and how long she had been absent, this no effort could recall.

Suddenly she rose to her feet. What was the use of making her head ache, when the solution she wanted was to be had by merely walking to the other end of

the house? The supper hour would bring him to her side naturally, of course; but the idea of waiting until then did not even present itself to her mind as a possibility. It was now, *now*, without a moment's delay that she must get to the bottom of this dark place.

This time she did not even think of the private entrance, which was so much more convenient to use, although more roundabout, but, walking straight across the passage, opened the door of the outer office —just then crowded with clients. At the apparition, so unlooked for, there fell a hush upon the hum of talk. Jews of the humbler sort in threadbare *kaftans* playing into all those weird shades of green to which cheap black stuffs are apt to fade, and peasants in leather coats whose odour vied with that of onions and tobacco, fell back instinctively before the tall white figure with the face as of stone, whose eyes, so threateningly dark, seemed to see nothing but the door opposite. The clerks looking up from their papers, lost their presence of mind too entirely in face of this unlooked-for incident either to spring up and open that inner door for her or else to inform her that the notary was most urgently engaged. In the midst of the sudden silence she reached the end of the long room, then paused for a moment before touching the door handle, as though trying to remember something or making a supreme effort at self-mastery, and giving the Jew nearest her just time enough rapidly to estimate the price of the lace flounce which she had been trailing over the dusty floor. During that moment she felt furtively for

something in her pocket, and it was with a piece of paper crushed between her fingers that in the next moment, shutting the door behind her, she stood within her father's office.

He was not alone: a Jew in a *kaftan* of black satin of that quality that "stands like a board," and with a beard that seemed moulded out of solid silver, occupied the centre of the business sanctuary, gesticulating with the true Old Testament vehemence. Morawek, glancing over his shoulder towards the door, first twitched his eyebrows with astonishment and then impatiently shook his head.

"Not now, Romana," he said quickly. "I have business with the Rabbi for another quarter of an hour, at least."

"But *I* have business with you *now*, and it will not take a quarter of an hour. Send him away, please, for a few minutes only."

"Impossible!" the notary was beginning, when, turning more completely in his chair, he plainly saw her face. Its expression reminded him a little of what it had been on the day when she had broken in upon his privacy something in this same manner, in order to ask to be sent away from Lyczyn. Then, as now, her face had looked too white and her eyes too black, and now, as then, he felt that whatever it was she wanted to say the matter would bear no postponement. With this conviction upon him he turned half apologetically to his kaftan-wearing client.

"It is well, it is well; I will wait a little," the Rabbi hastened to say, before even he was addressed, falling unconsciously—despite his silver beard and

the satin at eight florins a yard—into that purely automatic humility which so quickly becomes the second nature of a race that lives on sufferance. Taking from the table a hat as magnificent as his *kaftan*, he went out as quickly as though he apprehended a more forcible expulsion.

Romana's eyes, coming back from the door, went straight to her father's face.

"And now?" he asked, smiling quite pleasantly, although there was a little quite unshaped apprehension in his mind. "What can I do for my latest client?"

"Only answer a question. Tell me, papa, have you ever seen this paper before?"

She was smoothing out the sheet in her hand as she spoke, and now held it towards him. He took it, his eyebrows working the while, still with pure perplexity, and sitting sideways on his chair, began by looking first at the signature and then at the date, as was his business habit. So far away from his thoughts was the whole episode that even then he did not understand. It was only as his glance went over the contents that a light came into his mind. His practised eye had mastered them in an instant, but he still sat with the paper before his eyes, affecting to have some difficulty with the writing, which the friction of two years spent in Felix's pocket-book had rendered indistinct at places. Those few moments gained were all he required to recover from the shock of a surprise which was by no means welcome, and to shape his immediate plan of action. "So she has found out, after all? How? Never mind now,

it is clear that she knows and doesn't like it. Well, after all! The door is closed now, thank goodness! What a mercy this didn't happen two years ago!" Such were the morsels of reflection that floated through his mind in that interval. It was not an enviable position, even for such a father as Morawek, but by the time he raised his eyes from the paper they were almost serene again. He had made up his mind as to the course to pursue.

"Yes, I have seen this before," he said, without any outward sign of disturbance.

"Where?"

"Upon your writing-table one morning, two years ago—or rather, to be more exact, it was two years ago at Pentecost."

"Do you know for whom it was meant?"

"It was placed inside an envelope addressed to Michal Polinski, so I presume it was intended for him."

"Then how did it come inside an envelope addressed to Felix Weber?"

"Because I put it there."

He said it so simply, so entirely without hesitation, and looked her so straight in the eyes as he spoke that for a moment Romana herself was staggered. She had been very pale when she entered, but she turned now suddenly of so ghastly a white that the notary, evidently fearing some hysterical outburst, said quickly:

"Not here! Compose yourself, child! There are plenty of ears alongside, remember! It will not do to scream out here. Sit down a little over there and

we can talk over the matter quietly, even if the Rabbi has to wait twenty minutes instead of ten."

She looked at the sofa he was indicating, the same slippery sofa on which she had sat that evening when he had unclosed both the safe and the secret of his life before her, but she did not move.

"I am not going to scream; I only want you to explain—what you did."

"I saved you from yourself—that is what I did, as I know you will be the first to acknowledge when you have got over the astonishment of this—discovery, which I quite admit to have been a little startling to you. Nothing could have been simpler and nothing more fortunate than the way in which chance played into my hands. I had gone into your room that morning—it was some article in the *Neue Freie Presse* which I wanted to show you, if I remember rightly—but you were not there; you were in the garden watching the flood, I think. While I sat waiting for you the two notes you had written to your two suitors fell straight under my eyes. Unaware as I was that you possessed even one suitor my curiosity was, not unnaturally, aroused. I need not tell you that I read them—I would need to have been an imbecile father indeed if I had not read them. Of the note to Michal I completely approved, but not so the other one. Such a marriage, of course, was quite out of the question, and nothing was easier than to prevent it; but you know that I abominate scenes, though I don't pretend to be afraid of them, and besides I wished to spare you unnecessary excitement. The idea came to me to dismiss this unde-

sirable young man in your words instead of in mine, a dismissal which I knew was sure to be more effectual, and upon this idea I acted. It was not hard to find means for preventing the other note from reaching the post; and as for the other suitor—quite as undesirable as the first—I took the liberty of dealing with him myself, as I daresay you know by this time. That is the whole history of one of my most successful little essays in diplomacy."

He had spoken all the time in a carefully measured voice, glancing now and then towards the door, but without effort and even with a certain lightness of tone, for indeed the whole episode appeared to him to be a subject of self-congratulation, even of complacency. It was only her eyes that disturbed him a little and also astonished him greatly. So sure had he been of her retrospective approval of his act that he had even found it quite possible to imagine himself, at some later date perhaps, telling her the story himself and laughing over it in her company. But that had been a mistake, evidently. She still stood in the middle of the room without moving, and looking at him as he spoke, persistently and fixedly, without once glancing aside.

"And you think you had the right to do that?" she asked him, when he paused.

"Not only the right but even the duty. I could not expect you to understand that then, and that is why I did not attempt to explain; but you are no child now, you are a woman of the world, and you can have no difficulty in grasping my motives. You had lost your foolish little heart of sixteen to a man

of whom I knew for certain that his old-world ideas, his *bourgeois* habits, could never satisfy you. Was I going to let you sacrifice a brilliant future to a momentary delusion? Just as little as I had any intention of modifying, for his sake, the whole of my plans. Was a squeamish scruple of conscience going to stop me? Surely I have too often impressed upon you my principles regarding means and ends to let you imagine that?"

He broke off for a moment to see if she had anything to say, but she remained quite still, her fathomless black eyes still fixed upon his face in that same obstinate stare.

"I will not say that I acted entirely without regret," he said, and under the influence of her so strangely persistent look the cynical assurance of his tone dropped by just one shade. "I knew, of course, that you would have a bad time to pass through, but I knew also that it would pass, and the event has proved me right, magnificently right! Where would be your position now if I had played the sentimental father and weakly blessed what I knew could only turn out a curse? Where your princely mansion and where your coronet, eh, Countess Sobolewska?" and he uttered a fragment of his so rarely heard deep bass laugh, his massive shoulders giving one jerk as accompaniment. Then, noting that from her there came no response, he added with a sudden hardening of tone:

"I see that you still owe me a grudge, Romana. Women don't like being duped even for their good, that's an old story! Perhaps it's lucky, after all, that

the thing is done, quite done; so completely done that it cannot be undone."

"No, it cannot be undone," said Romana, stirring for the first time out of her immobility, and moving towards the door as she spoke.

"Had you not better go out the other way? There are a lot of people out there," said Morawek, thinking to himself that although she was evidently not going to scream it would be as well if those waiting Jews did not see her face just then.

She changed her direction mechanically, moving with a certain haste, but groping for the handle almost as though she did not see it. All in a moment she had felt that it was time to go, if something—she did not know what—was not to happen. It was not the fear of those inquisitive ears alongside which made her hurry to break off the interview. It was fear of herself. It was better not to speak at all than to say the frightful things which—half shaped and half understood—were struggling up from her soul to her lips, clamouring to be spoken; it was better to get out of this by any door, into any passage, rather than to stand here a moment longer with these thoughts in her mind, before this man, who was, after all, her father, and in whose face she yet felt that she would like to spit. It was one of those frightful moments in which a soul—not ill-meaning in itself—finds itself suddenly within measurable distance of a crime, and if she had known of any God to whom to be thankful she would have thanked Him now for even the small measure of self-mastery which decided her precipitate exit.

"It's clear she doesn't like it," mused the notary, left alone. "Yet she has taken it more quietly than I could have expected. It's her spirit of contradiction that is up in arms; a nature like hers doesn't like being led by the nose. Lucky, certainly, that the discovery came so late, though how it came at all is a mystery to me. She may fume a bit, but she'll quiet down soon enough, seeing that the thing is done."

And, touching the bell beside him, the notary gave orders for the Rabbi to be reintroduced into the sanctuary.

CHAPTER X.

FROM her father's office Romana went out straight into the garden. Wherever there were four walls she felt certain that she would choke. The garden too had its walls, and these were not wide by any means, but at least there was the sky overhead. The only level walk was the one which ran along the top of the terrace-like formation, just behind a screen of bushes which hid it from the house. This she began to pace, her arms crossed upon her breast, her face a little raised to meet the breeze, whose breath, cool with the approach of evening, seemed to be gently blowing from her nostrils the penetrating and sordid odours of the office.

It was not quite easy to range her thoughts immediately, and yet she felt that the moment was come for making up her accounts with the past, or, rather, with that man from whom she had just parted in that evil-smelling office. It was from his hands that she had received her past, it was to him she owed her present and would owe her future, in whatever shape it came. It was he who not only had bent her earliest thoughts to his will, but who also, unknown to herself, had guided her actions as it suited his ends. It was he whom she had to thank for everything that was good or evil in her life.

Just at first she did not know what name to give to this new and torturing emotion within her, something that had never been there in former days, not even when she had thought herself so absolutely, so entirely unhappy, and that now was tearing at the innermost strings of her being with a pain that was almost physical. A hate that is newborn is almost as incomprehensible as a love newborn, and alarming even to the breast in which it has abruptly reared its head. Despite the indignation which was running through all her veins, Romana could not immediately be sure of the real nature of the bitterness within her. What she had thought to feel for Felix at the time when she believed herself disdained had not been hate, it had been but love in another travesty; but this dull, aching rage was the real, the terrible thing, the thing which poisons the most sacred springs of our being and can turn even the soundest reason to temporary madness. She had learned to-day that it was possible to live side by side with a fellow-being for years and yet not to know him. It was to-day only that full recognition had come, and with it a flood of light upon far-off moments of perplexity. She remembered the many occasions in childhood when the harshness of her father's theories, the contemptuousness of his answers had shocked some instinct within her that was not yet articulate. She thought of the evening when he had laid his packets of railway shares and Government priorities before her and had bared before her his life's programme, with-

out yet entirely baring his soul. Already then a feeling of blankness had come over her, a recognition of some great gulf between their two natures; but it was to-day only that she had looked down to the bottom of the gulf. Repeating to herself the cynical words she had heard in the office, her heart grew cold within her.

And all the time, alongside of the indignant recoil of her being from acceptance of life in this shape, there was working within her a blind rage at the thought of the part she had been made to play, of the puppet she had been in his hands; blind rage, and with it a blind desire for revenge. Yes, revenge! Here was a coherent idea, at last, detaching itself from the confusion of emotions. To be revenged and to be avenged of her lost happiness. "It cannot be undone," he had said, with odious triumph, and that was true; nothing could undo the great betrayal of two years ago. The thing was irrevocable in the normal, the conventional sense of the word, but that was a sense for which she had never professed great regard, and which in moments of acute emotion was apt to lose in her eyes even the small value it ever possessed. Her happiness had been taken from her by treachery, might she not take it back again by an act of violence? Could it be wrong to seize upon that which was her own property, stolen from her as surely as ever purse or watch had been stolen? The world would call it wrong, of course, but with it and its opinion she had nothing more to do—of that she felt sure. How could everything be lost while they still loved

each other and were both still alive? Of herself she felt sure, and since last night she knew that he loved her. That vision of Aniela's face which had pursued her yesterday had lost its power to disturb her; if a father had the right to cheat his child, what obligations could friendship have? Nothing need be sacred if that great elementary law was not sacred. The soft place which she had felt in her heart till yesterday had turned as hard as steel. Why should she alone be sinned against? What was Aniela that she should be exempt from betrayal —since betrayal seemed to belong to the order of the world?

Her step grew more hurried as she paced the gravel. In her burning eyes was to be read the uprising of a soul in revolt with life. She did not know how long she had been here, but night was approaching already. To Roza, who had come to seek her, she had said that she wanted no supper, and now she was alone again amidst the thickening shadows. The bushes were turning into black clumps with only one outline for every group of two or three; the mountains were no more than shadows against the fading sky, even the Keremosz was not a real thing, but only a broad break in the shadows, a great emptiness between dark banks. From behind the screen of bushes she could hear Roza clattering her pots in the kitchen and humming an air in between, one of the plaintive love songs of the country, and coming so strangely from Roza's puerile lips. Something in the fall of one

of the notes took her memory back to another song she had heard only a few days ago:

"Lehn deine Wang
An meine Wang
Dann fliessen die Thränen zusammen,
Und an mein Herz
Drück fest dein Herz
Dann schlagen zusammen die Flammen."

A new and exquisite pain had come into the words since she had thought of them last, and also a wild hope. She stood still, then began quickly descending the downward path. She had remembered only now that she had told Felix to come back. Perhaps he was there already? If he loved her he would be there.

He was there. Her first glance over the wall showed her a dark silhouette patrolling the road.

"Felix," she said, almost aloud, regardless of the risk she was running, for after all that dark silhouette might not have been Felix.

He was before her in a moment, looking up at her with eyes which she guessed to be haggard, even through the shadow.

"I have found out; I can tell you now," she said, bending low over the wall. "We have been cheated. I have forced him to tell me." And, fetching her breath deeply between the short sentences, she told him what had passed between her and her father in the office that afternoon. While she spoke her hands went towards him uneasily, closing and unclosing

themselves, and did not lie still until they felt other hands about them.

"And your marriage?" came Felix's voice back to her, when she ceased speaking.

"Was a consequence of yours. I was not going to bear being spurned without showing that I too had the force to spurn."

He let go her hands, and beat upon his forehead with his closed fist.

"Oh, fool, fool! Can I never learn patience?"

What he did in the next moment was done so quickly that before she had time to understand she found him beside her. The wall, although high, was somewhat crumbly, affording footholds enough not only for clandestine lovers, but also for pilferers of apples and walnuts, as the notary knew to his annoyance.

Slowly Romana's head sank backwards; his face was close already—these were his lips. Her eyelids, falling heavily, seemed to her like a curtain which shut her off from all the rest of the world, from all the rest of her life. Nothing—nothing was to get mixed with this instant of unalloyed, of unreflecting bliss. Yes, this was Love at last, such as she had seen it in her dreams, such as she had never found it in Wiktor's arms. Here was the man who was ready to pay her in the same measure that she paid him, to merge his being into hers, as hers was already melting into his.

With a faintness she had never known before upon her, Romana felt herself being guided by his strong arm to the bench that stood at a few paces

off, and, still supported by him, sat there for a few moments longer, with closed eyes, and without moving, except for the nervous tremor which every now and then made the hand in her lap jerk convulsively. By the irregular sound of his breathing she knew that his whole being was as deeply shaken as her own.

In the house two lights had been lit, one almost at each end: in the notary's office and in Roza's kitchen, and now stared out upon the night like two eyes of fire set far apart.

"And to think that we might have been as happy as this for two years past!" said Romana at last, without opening her eyes. She was afraid that if she opened them the dream might vanish. "My father—"

"Do not call him your father," said Felix's voice, dark and menacing almost in her ear. "I want to forget that he is your father."

"And *I* do not want to forget it—ever. If he were not my father I could not feel this rage within me, and I require the rage: it gives me strength."

"And you have suffered all this time because of me? Oh, Romana, and I have thought of you as so cold and proud, so without mercy, so without heart! I could kneel down at your feet to beg your pardon for all the bad thoughts I have had of you!"

She smiled happily. "Then I should have to kneel too, for I have thought quite as bad things of you."

He ground his teeth so vigorously that she could hear the sound.

"You were right to think bad things of me: it is not your father alone, after all, it is I as well who have done it. Why could I not wait? It is always the wooden dog over again. Do you remember my telling you the story? I threw it into the fire because I could not wait to have its leg glued, and just so I threw away my happiness without waiting to see whether it still belonged to me or not."

"Yes, it was you too, Felix," she said gravely. "My father did the harm, but it was your precipitation which made it irrevocable. But let us not speak of the past—that is done with."

"I prefer to speak of the past than of the future," said Felix gloomily; and without his knowing it his arm relaxed a little in its clasp. "The future looks very black at this moment, for you are not in it."

"Of course he is not able to believe so quickly," said Romana to herself, but the tone and the movement (almost imperceptible though it had been) had touched her unpleasantly.

"The future is what we choose to make it," she said aloud, steadying her voice. The thought that it was she who would be making incomparably the greater sacrifice of the two had given her a sudden sense of daring, not quite comprehensible to herself; "that is—what we have the courage to make it. Perhaps you doubt my courage, Felix? That is because you really know me very little. I have courage for everything—do you understand? When once I have said 'I love you,' I have said everything! For to love and to give—to give with both

hands—is one thing to me. No sacrifice—be quite sure of that—no sacrifice at all would appear to me too great if only the object is great enough. Riches and position and all that they bring are nothing to me; I have tried them all and have found them all wanting."

Her voice broke with the last word, and she sat silent, the tears of earnestness making her eyes smart, not looking at him, but waiting for his next word and scarcely doubting its import. It had been almost dark a minute ago, but during the few moments that she sat waiting—and which seemed to her far longer than moments—Romana became aware of a sudden transparency about her. Over the edge of the mountain range the white moon crescent had just dipped into sight, turning the river into a silver road, and dropping its first arrow of light into the thickly grown garden.

It was after a moment of complete silence that Felix suddenly stood up.

"Romana!" he said, in a distracted voice, "Romana, what are we doing here?"

"Seeking to redeem the past," said Romana, turning her white face up to him. In spite of the movement she could not accept the inference it conveyed. This man loved her, by a thousand infallible symptoms she knew that he loved her; it could not be that he did not belong to her.

Felix's hand went up to his eyes, laying itself broadly across them.

"The past is dead—quite dead. Your father killed

it; but for us, at least, it has been without sin. Neither you nor I could live with that sin upon our future."

"Sin against what?" she asked, with another inflection in her voice; "against the beautiful order of the world which allows a father to play a game of sleight of hand with the whole life of his daughter, and which forbids me to take back my stolen property when I find it in other hands? I have done with that order. Henceforward I mean to make my laws for myself, and to obey nothing whose justice is dark to me."

They were both standing up now and in the full moonlight. The mountains, with black hollows and silver flanks, seemed to have drawn farther away, while beside the radiant purity of the flood that lay over the paths the two lights in the house burned now of a dusky orange. For the first time this evening Romana could see Felix's face plainly. It could not but raise her hopes, for it was drawn with pain—the eyes even appearing smaller, because of the folds of skin about them. How could he be suffering so much and yet resist? Yet his voice, when he spoke after a short pause, had an unexpected steadiness in it.

"You don't mean that, Romana! We are both mad, I think, and no wonder; but I cannot let you act with this madness upon you, nor spoil your whole life in one minute."

"It *is* spoilt," she said, just moving her lips; but he did not hear her. He had made two steps away from her and had come back again.

"Quick!" he said, in a tone of sudden and supreme urgency; "what is the use of prolonging this? You know that we must part, so let it be quick! I am going, Romana."

She gave no sign that she had heard; she was still telling herself that he could not have completely understood all that she was ready to do for his sake.

"I am going," he repeated, almost stolidly, though his lips looked grey in the waxing moonlight. That he was suffering cruelly, of this there could be no doubt, yet even in this moment he scarcely seemed to be struggling. Then, as she still said nothing, but only looked at him with eyes which, being in the shadow, told him nothing, and lips that appeared to have locked themselves for ever, he stretched out his arms once wide as though to seize her, but instead fell only at her feet clasping her knees to his face. Right through the thin fabric of her gown she could feel the fire of his kiss; then rising to his feet, he reached the wall in two headlong strides, leaped it and was gone.

* * * * * * *

Next morning at an early hour a letter was brought to Romana. It told her everything that she still required to be told after the garden scene of last night.

"ROMANA!

"It is morning already, and the light I write by is the one that comes through the window from the east, yet I still sit on the spot where I sat down last night on coming home. Aniela

and the little one are asleep, but sleep has not come near me for a moment; I feel as though it would never again come. I shall never see you again, and, therefore, I can say to you what I am going to say, for I feel that I have an explanation to give you—that you have the right to demand one of me. I do not know what incoherent things I may have said last night, and I do not want to leave the impression of a madman upon your mind.

"It has occurred to me that perhaps you think I do not understand. Romana, my lost love, I understand, and on my knees with my face in the dust I give you thanks for a favour of which no king of the earth would be worthy; but—forgive me, Romana, if you can,—I cannot put out my hand for the gift, for my hand is not free; it belongs to another. I did not marry Aniela out of love, I married her out of despair, out of spite, out of half a dozen sentiments which had nothing to do with love, and I have only to think of the moment in which I held you in my arms last night to know that I do not love her now: but—I married her! Everything is said there. To me the case is terribly simple: I see nothing but a desert before me, but not even you can hold me back from treading it. I can imagine my heart breaking, but I cannot imagine myself breaking that of my tender, my trusting companion. To cause unhappiness has always been repugnant to my nature, and this woman I have sworn to make happy if I can. Even miles away, in that new world to which we could have flown, even at your side her eyes would have looked at me and I would have heard the cry of her child and of mine calling me back to both. Between personal happiness and duty there never has seemed to me even the possibility of a choice, or perhaps it is only that I lack the moral heroism necessary for so supreme an act. Maybe you will despise me—then I must bear your contempt as I have borne other things before, as I bore what I thought to be your coldness and as I am now bearing the burden of our dead love. I am strong enough for that: but I am not strong enough to do for one who loves me that which Fate has done for me.

"I have finished. My heart is bare before you—for the

first and last time. Henceforward let me be dead to you; my fingers do not want to write the words, but they must do as I will. God be with you, my dearest! And may He give you a little of that peace which is not so good as happiness, but which so many of us have to be content with.

"FELIX WEBER."

CHAPTER XI.

THE cushions of the Lemberg Express were dustier than usual, the attendants grumpier and the travellers thirstier than is their habit even at this season. Peremptory demands for beer, and plaintive prayers for fresh water broke out simultaneously and regularly at every fresh stoppage, where the dispensers of beverages did a roaring trade, to the accompaniment of a chorus of overheated infants whose wails floated out through the lowered windows, at which visions of flushed and dishevelled females (many of whom had obviously discarded their stays) were to be momentarily caught.

With all the blinds of her reserved compartment lowered, Romana had shut out the monotonous and sordid pictures which heat and hurry combined are apt to conjure up on a summer day's journey. Of the heat she herself was only indirectly aware. With her hat off and her magnificent black hair contrasting sharply with the red velvet of the cushion, she half sat, half reclined in her corner, no longer attempting to put order in her thoughts, as she had tried to do yesterday in the garden at Lyczyn, but allowing them to surge over her at their will.

Scarcely an hour after the reception of Felix's letter she had left Lyczyn, since fortunately one of the only two out-going trains started so early; and

she had gone without any plan having formed itself in her mind, feeling only the necessity of putting space between her and the writer of that letter—just as once before she had felt the need of doing the same thing. Until the reception of the letter her innermost self had still stiffened itself against conviction, but with the plain words, black upon white, conviction had come. Nor had she reached the stage yet of doing justice to the writer. In a later, calmer moment she might weigh his words and be touched by their sincerity, but just now her heart was too sore to be generous. Rejected! She was rejected in very truth! And this time without any misunderstanding or mistake—with open eyes he had refused the love she had stooped to offer: for her that was the only thing written in that letter, the upshot of those four pages of superfluous discussion, and in every fibre of her being she felt the humiliation. Thinking back now of that half hour yesterday in the garden, in which the part she had played then became reduced by this letter to that of the vulgar temptress, while he stood for the virtuous knight who tears the meshes of the net thrown over him, she felt how—even although she was alone—one hot flush after another ran up to the roots of her hair. And yet at the time it had seemed to her so simple, so almost a matter of course, that if they loved each other nothing else was to count; for about Romana's ideas concerning love there was a certain naive wholeness which, in its primitive vigour, almost deserved to be called heathen. That Felix's sense of duty had been able

to triumph over his heart was to her as good as a proof that he had no heart at all. He had been either too strong or too weak for the sacrifice she had asked of him, she could not be sure which. One thing the letter made clear: that he could not reach higher than duty; he was the man of duty and of common, stolid loyalty; the man with the incurable respect for established things, for whom to make one step out of the beaten track is worse than death; and she was the woman of unbridled impulses and undisciplined spirit, who gives and takes without counting the cost. And the supremest mercy he could do to her was to recommend her to God! At the recollection she abruptly laughed aloud; what a pity he had omitted to explain to which God! For him it was all very well to speak of peace and consolation; he had something else, or thought he had something else, which, after all comes to the same thing, to fall back upon, while she—

No, the matter was much simpler than that; it was just that he did not love her enough, not in the degree in which her whole being imperiously demanded to be loved. Probably no man could love as she understood love; for its enjoyments they were ready, but its sacrifices lay beyond them. Angry contempt surged over her at the recognition. At that moment she was feeling hot and bitter against all men in the world, and simply for the reason that they were men; yet it was more especially for the sake of two men in particular that she was actually despising the whole of the

kind. And the resentment against those two was so intimately mingled as to be almost indistinguishable from each other. Even now Romana had not yet come to understand fully that her disappointment at Felix's resistance was not the disappointment of love alone, but also the disappointment of hate. Without having given the idea a concrete shape in her mind she had yet all the time been sub-consciously aware that to make her father's tactics recoil upon his own head, no better means could be found than an elopement with her lover; nor did she know that her audacity of last night had been born almost as much of the desire to do something which would outrage the notary's sense of the fitness of things, as of the craving to regain her personal happiness.

And now she had been cheated of both her ends, of her love and of her revenge; and what she saw before her looked so dreary and uninviting, so cold with lovelessness, so grey with monotony that she sometimes wondered at finding herself, of her own free will, in this railway compartment. To what was she going back? To a husband whom she despised more even than his kind, and to an old woman who probably hated her, to a daily round of warfare in words, of whose pettiness she had long since sickened.

Lemberg was reached and passed without rousing her out of her absorption. As the afternoon began to wear on towards evening both the wails of the infants and the cries for water became a little less urgent. In another hour or so she would have

reached her station, Romana told herself, as, stirring at last out of the half-lying position in which she had remained immovable for longer than she could count, she pulled up one of the blinds, for there was no more sun to shine into the carriage. They had just run into a station—the last before Rutkow, which was the one for Surowica. The look of it was familiar to her, as was also the lie of the country around, and there on the platform was something else that was familiar too—a narrow, white face and a pair of keen black eyes, scanning the windows through a well-poised gold *pince-nez.* She had not thought of Dr. Ligrinow once since her arrival in Lyczyn. Although he had been the cause of her journey, he had been actually almost forgotten before the journey's end. So far from her thoughts had he been that the sight of him now had almost the effect of a discovery, or of a recovery of something which had drawn so far off as to be temporarily out of sight. Remembering their last interview, her first impulse had been to draw back sharply from the window, but it was too late already—those black eyes seldom missed anything they wished to see.. Almost as she drew back his head was at the window.

"There is room in here, Countess, is there not?" he inquired, with his usual self-possession, yet with an unmistakable lighting up of his eyes. "Our roads lie together, it seems, since I, too, am bound homewards."

He was opening the door as he spoke, while Romana looked on, passive and scarcely displeased.

The society of the doctor would, at any rate, be more amusing than that of her thoughts. Already in the annoyance which the first sight of his face had aroused in her there had been mixed another sensation which she could not identify, but which was, in fact, a feeling akin to compensation. "To be sure, there is still that!" had been the thought which—indistinct as a shape of mist, yet rapid as a flash—had passed through her mind.

"I have a fever case in Oresko," explained the doctor, having raised her ungloved hand to his lips, and while installing himself in the opposite seat; "and have enjoyed the hospitality of the Express almost every day this week, but never in such agreeable company as this, and so unexpected, too! We all imagined that you had abandoned us for a month, at least."

"I meant to, but I have changed my plans, you see."

"Yes, I see; and regret even while rejoicing."

"Regret?" she echoed, with an astonishment that was almost displeasure.

"Purely from a professional point of view. To a doctor, you must understand, there is no spectacle more distressing than that of a set of human nerves that have been given to bear a strain that is beyond them."

Romana's eyebrows drew close together, gathering the fine white skin into folds.

"What makes you suppose that my nerves are out of order?"

"At least a hundred things: your colour, your

voice, the movements of your hands, the dilation of your pupils, and many other symptoms which it would be difficult to explain to a layman. It is quite evident that the air of Lyczyn—or possibly other things at Lyczyn—have, this time at least, not perfectly agreed with you."

"What an opportunity for airing your learning!" laughed Romana, rather harshly; "and what a pity I am not a medical student! I might profit ever so much by your company before reaching Rutkow!"

"I cannot share the regret," said the doctor, looking at her rather more steadfastly than was quite agreeable; "and perhaps, after all, there may be other profits to gain before we reach our station."

To avoid his gaze Romana turned her face to the window. They had moved out of the station already, and in proportion as the engine got up its speed the fields and houses were beginning to race past, fast and faster in the evening light. Romana watched them abstractedly, yet all the time felt the eyes of the doctor upon her, observing her with an attention so close that it began to be irksome.

"Surowica may be dull," he said at last, as though this were the result of his observations; "but at least it has never had so enervating an effect upon you as that place over there in the mountains. Both as a doctor and as a friend I can only hope that you will not so soon repeat the excursion."

"There is not much likelihood of that," she said quickly and bitterly.

The doctor made a scarcely perceptible movement, the interested gesture of a man who has made another mental note.

"That is a compensation."

"For what?"

"For a week that has been very empty without you, Countess—for one person, at least."

He spoke now with a certain caution, observing her the while without intermission. What he saw was annoyance, indeed; but nothing that made him recognise the necessity of stopping short as yet; for, besides the annoyance, there was a certain ill-suppressed excitement and other things, too, which he recognised as the marks not only of nerves that have been overstrained, but also of a will that has been shaken out of its foundations—all symptoms which he knew to be fugitive in their nature, yet affording almost incalculable opportunities to him who is able to use them. It may have been this reflection which moved him now to say abruptly, and with all the appearance of speaking upon impulse:

"That was a piece of unnecessary cruelty, Countess."

"What was?" she asked, almost unwillingly, unable quite to withstand the fascination of this dangerous game of words into which she felt herself being drawn.

"Your departure. Even granted that I had been a little indiscreet on the terrace that evening, what could you expect your journey to do? Did you suppose that not to see your face for a week, or a month, could cure me? Inefficacious as well as cruel."

"What makes you imagine that you had anything to do with my departure?"

"My own guilty conscience, no doubt." He paused for one moment before adding, slowly and deliberately, keeping her face well within his gaze:

"You must have known surely for long that I am your slave."

The word was spoken now—too seriously this time to be able to pass muster as a flippancy of conversation, and for a moment after it was spoken Romana's eyes, although they had flashed up, were not withdrawn from his. She was trying with a sort of mutinous opposition to see whether she could hold out his gaze or not; but after that moment she looked away. Oh, yes, it was nothing new that he was telling her; it was something so old as to be stale and pitiably familiar. There was scarcely any disturbance on her face, there was only an angry and weary contempt as she said:

"Of course I have known it for long, and I have heard it often enough—from others besides yourself—but what of that? Don't you remember my telling you that all that is lies, whether spoken by nightingales or men? That theory of mine is right, after all; I am sure of that now. You are just adding one more lie to the lies of the world, so don't expect that the world will go out of its course for such a trifle."

"Where have you picked up your theories about my unfortunate sex, I wonder! At Lyczyn? I am almost tempted to suppose that they breed a remarkably vigorous set of liars over there; but is it

fair to condemn the race because of some graceless individual who perhaps has not known how to appreciate his good fortune?" His eyes were reading every line of her face, as he added:

"Give me but the chance, and I shall disprove the accusation which that man has brought upon his kind."

She did not speak now. With face turned from him she had resumed her vague study of the darkening landscape, but he could see by the lines of her mouth that with his last words she had tightly pressed her teeth together. The image which those words had conjured up was pushing itself in between her eyes and the landscape, and, even without looking at the man before her, she was mentally comparing the outward appearance of the two, with a result which, in her present resentful mood, was by no means unfavourable to the doctor. There could be no doubt that in point of elegance of figure, of adroitness in conversation and refinement of manner he bore away the palm, far and away over that country engineer with the broad shoulders and the German downrightness of speech. It was true that she had scarcely remembered his existence during the past week, but brought abruptly into this near contact she began to feel upon her that same sense of attraction which had made his society the one exciting thing in her flatly luxurious life.

He was speaking again, still in his measured voice; not pleading, not imploring, but rather arguing, as one would argue out some interesting

theme, proving to her from the point of view of every philosophy in the world that she was a free woman, at liberty to do with herself as she found good. And she listened without checking him and without answering, finding a sort of contradictious pleasure in hearing these words, which she yet suspected to be false. Outside the shadows were falling thicker and the rattle of the train sounded in her ears like an accompaniment to the stream of persuasion that was flowing in so steadily, so persistently upon her. What was the need of stopping him yet? Presently they would reach their station, and it would be time enough then to turn and laugh in his face, and meanwhile there was a sort of savage interest in the thought of the disappointment in store for him, and which he had deserved, if only by his title of man. He had changed his seat to the one beside hers, in order, apparently, to speak with less effort, but as yet it was only his words which were growing more aggressive.

"I have worn the mask long enough, it will not fit any longer. Why should I suffocate under it, since I know that you too wear a mask, Countess? Let us throw them away together! What you will find under mine I have told you already; the prostration of a worshipper before his idol. I have always been helpless in the presence of Beauty, but I have never before felt so inclined to bend my head before any work of Art as I feel now inclined to do before the work of Nature which is your face."

Still she kept silent, her eyes upon the window. Unknown to herself, the excitement within her was

beginning to turn into another channel. His voice in her ear had conjured up something that was scarcely a possibility as yet, rather the barest, dimmest outline of a possibility—an idea to be played with only, so far, a theory wherewith to amuse her mind, without admitting the contingency of its ever leading to practice.

"All that I shall find under your mask I do not know, and am not conceited enough to expect anything that approaches my own attitude of mind, but that I shall find no love for the man whose name you bear, of that I feel sure; nor any sense of responsibility towards him. If you are deaf to me now it will not be for *his* sake, at any rate. But you will not be deaf; your sense of the fitness of things alone assures me of that. It is not possible that because you have an unworthy husband you should elect to go through life without enjoying it—in the measure to which your beauty entitles you. *Aimer c'est vivre,* you know! Do you remember?"

With the last words he bent a little towards her, and although she did not look at him she could guess from his voice that he was smiling. How paradoxical was this man who, while making love to his neighbour's wife, could keep himself so entirely in hand, who could utter words of passion so almost dispassionately! There was something in the innate contradiction of the attitudes which both tickled her fancy and somewhat piqued the undestroyable vanity of the beautiful woman. That ardour which he so successfully concealed must, after all, exist somewhere, since without it he would

scarcely be risking what he was risking. It would be a gratification, at least, to put her finger on the spot, to see this miracle of self-possession exposed at last—the skilful fencer in words disarmed and at her mercy. It was this thought that was running in her mind when she turned to reply.

"Yes, I remember; but you must remember too that that sort of love is not meant to last beyond to-morrow. *Jusqu' à demain,* you know. No, don't swear! I know that you have an inexhaustible fund of oaths lying ready, but I tell you that I am sick of oaths."

"But I don't mean to swear any oaths," said the doctor, unabashed; "and I quite agree with you as to the fragility of the article. My position is absolutely distinct from that of whatever unfortunate bungler may have incurred your displeasure. I have told you often that I am by rights an ancient Athenian; for me there exists only one creed, that of Beauty; one idol, Beauty; one legal use for mental and physical powers, the cult of Beauty. Is it my fault that female beauty in particular should be the form which appeals to me most strongly? With me, I say it frankly, the more beautiful has always been the enemy of the beautiful; that is why I have been branded as inconstant when exactly the change of my object of worship is the best proof of my immovable constancy to my chosen god! Therefore I swear no oaths; I only say to you: You are the most beautiful woman I have yet seen in the world, therefore I belong to you absolutely and entirely. Should a miracle happen, and a more

beautiful woman come between us, I should be as much forced to follow her as the needle is forced to follow the magnet; but as I do not believe in miracles it is the same as though I said: I belong to you for ever."

About Romana's lips a smile that was still half bitter played more visibly. The daring self-reliance of the man was ensnaring her fancy more deeply with every word, while something about the audacious cynicism of his theory corresponded to the growing recklessness within her. And again a mental comparison rose before her. Would it not seem as though, after all, of her two lovers this one were the better suited to her abnormal individuality?—the one towards whom the sense of affinity was drawing her, rather than that other of whom at this moment it was hard to distinguish whether she loved or despised him? Was it even likely that the man of imagined duties, the tame follower of a standing order, could ever have fully satisfied her? In this moment it seemed to her that he could not have done so, for under the persistent gaze of those dark eyes, at the sound of those words (more persuasive with every moment and spoken more closely in her ear), the ideas in her head were beginning to swim. Quite unexpectedly she had spied an outlet for the rebellion within her, for that devouring desire to do something that would openly proclaim her breakage with human society and its hateful laws, and even though it was only to be done by provoking a catastrophe; any sort of catastrophe would be preferable to things as they now were. It was as

though her whole being, her nerves, her mind, her will, which just twenty-four hours ago had been strung up to the resolution of a supreme step, were crying out for the excitement they had been cheated of, as though they refused to settle down to life in its every-day shape. The doctor, watching, saw how her eyes first dilated and then contracted, while once more the bitter smile drew her lips apart. In that moment she had said to herself: "What nonsense! Of course he is only doing what the others have done, even though he may do it differently, and at the first word of sacrifice he will shrink back as the other one shrank." Next came the thought: "How would it be to put him to the test? To see his discomfiture would at least be amusing."

"And supposing I was not deaf to you?" she asked, all at once, turning her eyes full upon him. "Supposing I were to say to you: Yes, I accept your homage, I am willing to become to you the personification of your idol—but on one condition."

"You have only to name it."

"In order to put an end to your importunity, you mean?"

"In order to see it fulfilled."

"And if my condition was a break with the world and with your present life? If I were to say to you: I have no talent for playing comedies and no desire to wrap myself painfully in the rags of a false respectability; but lead me to the end of the world, in the face of the world, and I am willing to accept

your theory and to say with you: *Aimer c'est vivre!*"

He looked at her in silence for a moment, and so perfect was his self-control that scarcely any surprise appeared upon his face, although in truth he was very much surprised, and even taken aback. In his own mind he had not contemplated anything more sensational than one of those easy and convenient little intrigues which, if skilfully managed, bring so little danger, and in the skilful management of which he had so large a practice. But being a man of amazing presence of mind as well as of inexhaustible boldness, he quickly perceived that here there was only one course to pursue. Although he did not know what exact circumstances had put Romana into her present abnormal mood, he yet judged the mood itself as correctly as he was accustomed to do the state of a patient, reading the symptoms and from them concluding the illness.

"You are ready for that?" he asked slowly, while rapidly rearranging his ideas on this new basis.

"I am not ready to do anything else, at any rate. I have never loved half measures."

"Nor I," he said, quite decided already, "another proof that Fate has destined us for each other."

She stared incredulously. "You mean—"

"That your condition fulfils my hottest wish, which I had only not dared to put into words. Yes, the world is big, Romana, and I will take you to its furthermost end, if you will."

"Never to return to your present life?" she asked,

wide-eyed. "To break with everything you have here?"

"I have nothing but your face, beautiful Countess, and that goes with me."

She could find no further word for a moment. Was it indeed possible that she had at last found the man who understood Love as she understood it? Who thought her worth the sacrifice of everything that was not herself, not too dearly bought at the price of a scandal? An astonishment that was almost awe kept her silent, while a new alarm made her heart beat faster. That thought which she had wanted only to play with had suddenly, between her hands, turned to something so serious as to be momentous; the distant possibility had become an actuality that was pressing in upon her and taking away her breath. Suddenly she discovered that that strength of resistance on which she had counted so firmly was relaxing, and she felt it as distinctly as a weakened body feels its knees bending under it, and is yet helpless to stiffen the muscles which might save it from the approaching danger. He loved her, that was certain; not only his words, but the tone of his voice, the flame in his eye, his quickened breath were beginning to tell her that, for the ardour so successfuly kept under was breaking its way at last. He loved her, and to be loved in this entire manner, that neither weighs nor counts costs, had always been her dream; nor did it in this fiercely agitated moment appear to her at all certain that she did not love him. What Michal Polinski had long ago said of the

straw fire had been a cruel calumny, and yet contained a grain of truth in it, for Roumanian blood—however loyal and however unspoiled—can never quite escape the penalties of its inflammable nature.

And meanwhile he was leaving her no time to come to her senses, having changed his tactics with a rapidity which completely masked the change itself.

"Beautiful Countess," he whispered, bending still closer, although he had not so much as touched her hand as yet. "Our plan is made, is it not? Why postpone the execution for even one day? Do you realise how simple a kind Providence has made matters for us? We have only to stop where we are, instead of getting out at our station, and the thing is done."

The idea had come to him almost in the instant of uttering it. Every look that passed over her face told him more surely that this was the favourable moment that was passing, perhaps never to return. The vulgar proverb which counsels to strike while the iron is hot was probably not present to his fastidiously refined mind, and yet it was nothing but this feeling which pressed him to haste.

"There can be no more favourable opportunity," he urged.

Romana looked at him almost in terror, staring for a moment as though she did not understand.

"But my carriage is waiting," she stammered, as much disconcerted as though the first suggestion had not come from herself. "I telegraphed this morning from Lyczyn."

"That is of no consequence; the stoppage is only one minute. We have but to keep away from the window, and they will suppose you have missed your train. Before they find out anything we shall be in Hungary, and from there the world is open to us."

She put her hand over her eyes, partly in order to shut out his gaze, but also because she was trying to collect her thoughts. What he said was true; there were no physical difficulties in the way, nor even any great practical ones, for in the urgency of the moment her feverishly working brain had found time for an almost business-like reflection. Flight, of course, was unthinkable without money, but she had a good deal about her and even some jewels, and as for the future, the doctor would see to that, of course. No, on that side there was nothing to make the thing impossible. And on any other? In this brief interval, with her hand pressed over her eyes, it was as though her soul, recoiling in spite of everything before the final step, was rapidly passing in review every consideration that might still suffice to hold it back. But what was there? Not any feeling of duty towards a husband who for long had scarcely existed for her; not any thought of the wife who was going to find herself deserted—and not for the first time, either. For Romana, that dolorous figure of a woman, whom she had never seen, was scarcely a real person. If she had ever thought of her at all it was with the pitying wonder which so despicable a spirit of submission unavoidably awakened in her own proud heart.

No, such a wife as that could not count in the matter at all. What else was there, then? Dread of the world's condemnation? Why, that was the very thing she courted. Religion? Faith? Empty words to her. Consideration for her father? At the mere thought she felt how her last hesitations were vanishing, and partly understood that if she yielded now to the pressure bearing in upon her, her act would be more than half an act of vengeance, not on him alone, but also on that other man who had refused to bring the sacrifice for which this one was ready.

But the decision could not wait, for already the signalling whistle had died away and the train was slackening pace. She heard the doctor's voice close to her, without understanding the words he said, and without having yet entirely yielded. As the train drew up her wandering gaze fell straight upon the footman waiting stolidly on the platform, and instinctively she leaned forward as though to give him a signal, but in the same instant the doctor, leaning across her, sharply pulled down the blind. With blazing eyes she sprang to her feet, stretching her hand towards the tassel, but before she had touched it stopped short, aghast at the change in her companion. Without a sound he had sunk back upon his seat, his habitual pallor turning to the lividness of a corpse, his features convulsed with what was evidently a physical pain, while with fingers that seemed suddenly to have become of wood he grasped stiffly at his heart. In a flash Romana remembered his disease, which she had heard of with-

out quite believing in it, and in the sudden alarm of the sight forgot everything that was unconnected with it. Each one of these attacks threw his life in the balance, so she had been told, and now she asked herself with terror whether he was going to die before her eyes? It was obvious that the agitation of this last hour was demanding its due at last, that that impeccable self-possession had been bought at the cost of physical power. Again she turned towards the window, meaning to call for assistance, but he—guessing her intention—had the strength to stop her with a gesture. He was smiling at her now, painfully and faintly, as though to reassure her; and now he was putting out his poor convulsed hand towards hers, and she, yielding it without resistance, allowed him to drag it to his side and to lay it there, as one may lay a healing plaister. As against her tingling skin she felt the tortured beating of that sick heart a great and sudden pity came over her. Towards anything that suffered, anything that was weak in any sense, her physically robust nature had always felt compassionately drawn.

And while she bent over him, immovable, with the one thought in her mind that he should not die, the bell clanged and the engine shrieked, and the Express—straining its iron muscles—thundered out once more into the gathering night.

CHAPTER XII.

THE long, dingy corridors of the Lemberg Court of Justice were, on a late day of October, full to overflowing. Long before 9 A.M., the hour of the opening of the Session, the spectators had begun to arrive, partly on foot, but principally in cabs and private equipages, for it was eminently an elegant public that was to-day assembling, and—needless to add—a feminine one. These usually so monotonous and so depressing spaces resembled to-day more the place of a fashionable gathering, of some charity bazaar for instance, than the stern seat of Justice. Any one anxious to know whether sleeves were going to be worn wide or tight this season, or desirous of studying the latest thing in hat trimming, could not have done better than pay a visit to the Landesgericht to-day. Here the newest autumn costumes, as well as bright eyes, flashing smiles and eager and animated faces, were to be seen. The treat in store was worth it, too, so sensationally *piquante* a case had not been in the papers for long as the one put down for to-day's deliberation.

Within, in the big hall of session, the benches were filling up rapidly. They were not very luxurious to sit on, yet the young and old matrons, who had obviously left their daughters at home, took place with as much pleased settling of folds as

though they were letting themselves down in their theatre boxes.

As yet, however, there was little to see. The upper part of the hall, divided from the lower by a stout wooden railing, was so far almost empty. Here, raised upon a step, stood the massive, slightly crescent-shaped judge's table, with blue glass inkstands and large sheets of white blotting-paper almost covering its green cloth surface. To the right the jury's seats, to the left, parallel with the table, the high desk of the public prosecutor; alongside and facing the jury the benches for the advocates or experts eventually to be employed. On the whitewashed wall straight above the door in the background a huge wooden crucifix; above the jury's box an oil painting of the Emperor Francis Joseph in his coronation robes; on the opposite side the long wall broken by a row of tall, curtainless windows through which a glimpse far over the roofs of the houses and out into the flat country beyond could be gained.

From time to time some haggard-looking usher would bustle about the table to assure himself that the blue glass inkstands were full enough or to try the points of pens and pencils. The door in the right-hand corner, as well as that behind the judge's table, was scarcely still for a moment; for through the one the jurymen were arriving, generally singly, and disappearing through the other into the room where the urn was to decide which of the thirty-six summoned were to be the twelve retained for to-day's session. As a rule, each one put his hand somewhat fearfully into the fateful urn, praying inwardly for

a blank; but to-day the matter stood differently. To have served on the jury of *the* case of the season would always remain a thing to remember and to talk about, therefore on the faces of those liberated there was disappointment rather than relief to be read, as they recrossed the hall to regain the passage from which many among them entered again by another door, to mingle with the spectators.

"It's a pity they don't take *us* as jury," remarked a plain-faced but ultra-fashionable young woman to her neighbour. "It's a case which *we* would be able to judge far better than men."

Her companion—a ravishingly dreamy blonde whom any one would have taken for a girl—looked doubtful.

"H'm—yes, perhaps; but I cannot say that I have got my verdict ready yet."

"Haven't you? I have: Not guilty, of course."

"But, Ludwika!—since he does not even deny!"

"That only shows his generosity. The main fact, of course, he cannot deny, and as for the circumstances he can't deny these without throwing all the blame on *her,* which he is far too correct a man to do."

"And yet he is said to be so dangerous!"

The plain-faced *élégante* gave a charming little snort.

"Dangerous! That is always the word for these occasions; the one apology of all those beauties gone wrong. As if there could be any danger against which one cannot arm one's self! It is women's readiness that makes men dangerous, I tell you, my

dear. Since I have seen her photograph in the windows it is quite clear to me that the fault can only have been on her side."

"It may be," said the blonde, still doubtfully; perhaps because she was a bit of a beauty herself, and therefore better able to appreciate the perils of the situation.

"We shall see her, I suppose," some one else was saying close by. "Of course they will use her as a witness."

"I'm afraid we shan't; they say she has refused to witness—she has the option, you know, under the circumstances. What is that you are saying, Marya?" and the speaker bent her head to catch an excited whisper alongside. "Impossible! Really? Dear me, do you know what Marya declares? That that scraggy woman with the washed-out hair and face—there on the front bench in the black jet bonnet—is Madame Ligrinow! Just imagine her showing herself here!"

And immediately at least a dozen necks were stretched in order to catch a better view of the wife of the chief accused.

Fifteen years ago, when the scragginess had been slenderness and the washed-out tints had been delicacy of colouring, she might have been more than usually pretty, indeed she would have needed to be so in order to become her husband's wife. But to-day she was no more than a wreck of a woman, and so completely wrecked as to have become indifferent to the fact. Seemingly unaware of her surroundings she sat there, having not even found it worth while to

lower her veil so as to mask the redness of her eyelids, swollen with weeping, her glance returning continually to the door through which the accused would presently enter, while in her hand she held tightly a small bottle of smelling-salts, which, however, she did not seem to require for herself.

"I bet she has got brandy for him in that bag by her side," tittered a flippant young woman, married since a week only, and all the prouder of her right to be here. "Mercy, what a spirit of forgiveness!"

Meanwhile the hand of the big clock at the lower end of the hall had crept close to nine o'clock and the members of the tribunal had come in, almost on each other's heels, but not as yet in their official capacity, nor in their official robes. The president glanced at his *talar,* which an usher had hung over the back of his chair and then towards the spectators, and decided that the metamorphosis had better not take place in public, as was his lax habit. In face of those many fashionable bonnets a full-dress entrance would certainly be preferable; as a result of which reflection he, as well as his colleagues, disappeared again temporarily through the door in the background.

Five minutes later, as the clock-hand touched nine, and amidst a sudden hush in the bustle and hum of the big hall, they came back again—no longer the same men, conscious evidently of the dignity which the black folds of their robes, flowing around them, gave to their figures, whether tall or short, yet at the same time obviously anxious not to appear too conscious of it.

"Very becoming," whispered one lady to her

neighbour; "much nicer than the old uniform, only it's a pity that the violet bands clash so fearfully with the blue inkstands on the table."

The public prosecutor, distinguished by the narrow scarlet border to the cape of his *talar,* reached his desk in half a dozen large strides, and from there threw a scrutinising glance towards the bench alongside and more especially at the advocate for the chief accused, already installed in his place. Ancient adversaries, these two, who had often on this same spot fought over the life or the fate of a man, and who to-day, despite the polite bow exchanged, were prepared to close more fiercely than ever, for it was certain that the verdict would remain immortally wedded to the name of whichever of the two men of law should succeed in obtaining it. Public opinion, knowing that the advocate-general himself was going to prosecute, was inclined to consider the case for the accused lost; for, of all his colleagues in Galicia, Doctor Petrowicz was the one with the highest record for condemnations. Merely to look at the man was enough to strike terror into the heart of the most guiltless prisoner. A shock head of iron-grey hair, so thick and so unmanageable as to give the impression of not being hair at all, but rather a shaggy fur cap, and leaving only a narrow strip of yellowish skin visible between it and the untidy eyebrows, gave to his whole appearance a touch almost of barbarism, and brought him into continual difficulties with the *barett,* whose plate-like shape declined to sit comfortably upon the rebellious undergrowth. Of other features the public prosecutor possessed a short, stubby

beard to match the hair, a pair of sharp, little grey eyes looking vigorously out of narrow slits, and an indescribably lumpy nose—the almost alarming ugliness of his face being redeemed only at moments by a smile which, despite the irregular and somewhat dusky teeth displayed, was distinctly agreeable and appeared unexpectedly, generally at the moment when he was saying the most disagreeable things. Beside him the sleek, well-fed advocate of obviously Jewish descent, who shed around him a perfume of rose pomade and whose hair and face shone all over as though recently oiled, appeared a comparatively harmless individual, but Doctor Petrowicz himself knew better, and the glance with which he measured him now was such as a fencer is apt to give to "a foeman worthy of his steel,"—after which he proceeded to free himself of the inconvenient cap, which had been on the point of slipping off his head of its own accord.

The jury had now filed in, and half self-consciously, half awkwardly taken their allotted places. Raising his eyes from the papers before him the president looked about him carefully. Every one was there, it seemed—the two medical experts on the bench below that of the advocates, the secretaries installed at their table, pen in hand, the journalists in their private seat. On the front of the judge's table a pair of candlesticks had been placed and two brass crucifixes—a one-armed one and a three-armed one (the forms used respectively by the Roman and by the Greek Catholic churches)—in preparation for the contingency of oaths to be taken by witnesses be-

longing to either creed. Another object too had been laid upon the table, one towards which many eyes turned with a sort of fearful interest, but of which many of the fair spectators were not clear in their minds as to whether it was a pistol or a revolver.

It was the moment before the session was to be declared open, a moment which this particular president always rather enjoyed, as one of those in which the sense of his own personal importance was most vividly brought home to him. Although an extremely conscientious judge he was never quite able to dissociate his somewhat fascinating person from his office, and his head had been just a trifle turned by the rapidity of his advancement. Women's favour was said by some people to have helped him in his career, while others—jealous colleagues, generally—declared sneeringly that he owed it all to his beard. It certainly was a beard magnificent enough to shed dignity not only over an entire court of justice, but over a whole Code of Laws and Paragraphs; a beard which seemed to have been invented for a *talar,* and making up the most ideal judge's head ever seen above the fateful table. Also the president never could quite forget its existence; the process of stroking it, of dividing and redividing it, of passing his taper, white fingers—comb-like—through its glossy brown waves seemed to give the necessary outlet to impatience or to over-strained nerves. In contradistinction to Doctor Petrowicz, the president, who, being prematurely bald, knew well that he only looked his best with his head covered, rarely removed

his *barett*—never before such a fashionable public as to-day's. Of his two colleagues, the one to the right of him had a brown, peaked face and a thin, vulture's neck protruding conspicuously from the violet-edged cape, the one to the left was portly and fair and looked far too good-natured to condemn even a convicted criminal.

"The session is opened," announced the president, in a melodiously rich voice. "Let the accused be introduced."

There was a sharp rustling of silks, followed by a universal bending forward of heads, which remained in their strained position until a door close beside the railing opened to admit five men, who entered in single file. Of the five accused two were in the uniform of lancer lieutenants, the three others in the most faultless civilian attire, the last of the file being Doctor Ligrinow. It was only as the figure of the chief accused became visible that the long restrained breaths were deeply drawn and the first shiver of real excitement passed over the mass of female nerves accumulated between these four walls.

The doctor, as he took place upon the cushioned armchair, which regard for his health had provided for him beside the bench on which the other accused ranged themselves, showed as elegant an appearance and as complete an outward self-possession as he had ever done in his life; and yet those who knew him saw that he was changed. Into his habitual pallor there had entered a more wax-like tint, while about the mouth and the somewhat sunken eyes there was a new, pinched look. The woman on the front bench

with the smelling-salts in her hand grasped them a little tighter as she bent forward on her seat. A few minutes later she had to stand up, together with the rest of the public, for the president—having finished a short address to the jury—was already on his feet, reading aloud the formula for their oath. That over, there followed a great pushing about of chairs and another great rustling of silks as every one within the hall, with the exception of the five accused men, settled in their places. It was now only that the figure of the chief accused became conspicuous. With an attitude as free from embarrassment as though he had been in a drawing-room or the consulting room of a hospital, he stood there, the target of all eyes, having already exchanged a courteous salute with his colleagues—the experts—and now quietly awaiting the first words of the accusation. The president had taken the sheet from the hand of a secretary. Generally, when the document was at all lengthy, the reading of it was left to one of his colleagues, but he knew his voice to be melodious, and this was no bad opportunity for letting it be heard. Holding the paper before him with one hand, the other meanwhile busy with his beard, he began to read with exceptional care in the pronunciation.

CHAPTER XIII.

"THE accusation is hereby raised against Stefan Ligrinow, doctor of medicine, aged forty-one ('As much as that?' reflected more than one woman upon the crowded benches), married, childless, of having, on August 23, by taking part in a duel, and thereby causing the death of Count Wiktor Sobolewski, landed proprietor in the circle of Oresko, come into collision with the ninety-eighth paragraph of the Austrian Code of Law. Also against Karol Serkowski and Josef Zelicki, landed proprietors in the circle of Oresko, and against Adolf, Baron Becker, and Ernst Nowak, lieutenants in the Twenty-first Lancer Regiment, for having acted as seconds in the said duel, and thereby come into collision with the same paragraph.

"The grounds for the accusation are as follows:

"Between six and seven o'clock on the morning of the 23d of August Julian Brassilko, forester in the domain of Pietra, in the neighbouring land of Roumania, being occupied with making his usual rounds, heard the reports of two shots rapidly following on each other, and coming from the direction of the Austrian frontier. Believing in the presence of poachers, whose incursions are greatly favoured in this neighbourhood by the vicinity of the frontier, he hurried towards the spot, and after a few minutes'

search came upon a clearing, on which he saw no living person, but in the centre of which there lay the body of a man unknown to him, dressed in the clothes of the upper classes, and with a wound in the head which had scarcely stopped bleeding. A pistol, still warm to the touch, lay at about a yard from him. Having assured himself that the man was quite dead, Julian Brassilko started to seek assistance, persuaded that a murder had taken place. By the time, however, that he had secured police help, the only further traces of the other party or parties to be found were the fresh marks of carriage wheels upon an unused track of the forest and leading in the direction of the frontier. A doctor having been called to the spot, the cause of death was pronounced to be the rupture of an artery in the head, caused by a pistol shot, by which the blood had entered the brain, bringing about an almost instantaneous extinction of life. The police, having immediately concluded on a duel, gave notice to the Austrian authorities, whose investigations within two days led to the identification of the fallen man as Count Wiktor Sobolewski, proprietor of Surowica in the circle of Oresko. Public opinion pointing unanimously to Doctor Stefan Ligrinow as his probable adversary, and further inquiries having shown this suspicion to be well founded, an investigation was ordered.

"The grounds supporting the suspicion were as follows:

"On the evening of August 20, Countess Sobolewska, wife of Wiktor Sobolewska, then absent from home, and although having telegraphically an-

nounced her arrival in the station of Rutkow, did not get out of the express train which stops there at seven in the evening, whereas Pawel Say, footman in the service of Count Sobolewska, affirmed having seen her at the window of one of the compartments in the company of Doctor Ligrinow, whom he knew well by sight. Acting upon this information, as well as upon observations made earlier, regarding an intimacy between his wife and the doctor—whose non-appearance in his home had already caused considerable astonishment—Count Sobolewski started next day for Hungary, on the supposition that this would be the natural line of flight, and actually found Countess Sobolewska and Doctor Ligrinow lodging in the same hotel in Pesth.

"These circumstances taken into account, it appeared highly probable that a challenge had passed, for which reason the investigation was ordered. The doctor being called to account, immediately acknowledged himself to have been the opponent of Count Sobolewski, while attempting to deny the other circumstances, apparently with the desire of shielding the reputation of Countess Sobolewska, whose presence simultaneous with his own at Pesth he tried to represent as casual; but becoming convinced that the Countess herself had rendered this effort futile by the attitude she adopted towards her husband, he made a full confession, contending only that, having been the person challenged, the laws of society left him no alternative but to accept, and requesting that no one but himself should be called to account. As, however, the paragraph ninety-eight declares duel-

ling to be illegal, and all persons therein directly or indirectly concerned as breakers of the law, not only the accusation against Doctor Stefan Ligrinow himself, but also that against the four persons who acted as seconds in the duel is fully justified."

As the President's musical voice fell to a final full stop almost every person in the room made some slight movement in his or her seat as though to recover from the stiffness which the attentive immobility of the last five minutes had entailed. With a slight inclination of the head towards the tribunal, the four seconds in the duel walked out again the way they had come, pending their turn for examination, and leaving the chief accused standing alone and more conspicuous than ever in the centre of the clear space. He alone had not changed his position, but, through his gold-rimmed eye-glass, looked the president composedly in the face. It was with a slight irritation, not quite easy to conceal, that the president returned the look. He himself in his young days had been known for a distinctly successful Lovelace, which caused him to look at the man whom he was to judge with a feeling of almost envious interest; for he too had seen Countess Sobolewska's photograph, and could not help thinking that to have gained the reputation of being her lover and the hero of so daring an adventure must go far towards outweighing the disagreeables of the doctor's present position.

It was this mixture of feelings, perhaps, which put a slight flavour of sharpness into the tone of his first question to the accused.

"Your name?"

"Stefan Ligrinow."

"Your profession?"

"Doctor of medicine."

"Your age?"

"Forty-one."

"You have heard the accusation," said the president, having exhausted the rest of the purely formal questions. "Do you confess yourself guilty?"

"I acknowledge having fought with Count Sobolewski, but I plead that I was acting under the pressure of irresistible circumstances."

"That is what the jury will decide."

Already the president's voice had fallen into that instinctively courteous tone which one man of the world finds it almost impossible not to employ towards another, even if one be judge and the other culprit. "Will you now proceed to give us, from your own point of view, an account of the circumstances which led to the duel on August 23rd?"

At that moment one of the two medical experts, having risen noiselessly from his seat, approached the table to say something in the ear of the portly, fair-haired judge, who in his turn passed on the word to the president.

"Your health is affected, I believe," said the president, more mildly than ever. "The court has no objection to your giving your evidence sitting, if you prefer."

As, inclining his head, Doctor Ligrinow took place again upon his cushioned armchair, a sigh of relief was audibly breathed on the front bench.

"Give us your account of the matter," said the president again, encouragingly.

"I have nothing to say which differs from what is contained in the accusation. It is true that Count Sobolewski, believing his honour threatened, sent two gentlemen to me on August 22d to challenge me to a duel."

"Which you accepted?"

"Which I had no choice but to accept unless I wanted to lose my place in society."

"Yet you know that duels are forbidden by the law of the land?"

"I know only that they are prescribed by the laws of the world in which we live."

"Who had the choice of the weapons?"

"I, as the challenged."

"What made you choose pistols?"

"My seconds chose them for me. The case was too grave for swords, as I myself knew."

"Will you now examine the pistol on the table and tell us whether it is your property?"

Then, as the pistol was handed to the doctor:

"That is the weapon found in the forest beside Count Sobolewski's body."

"Yes, it is mine."

"The one you fired off at the Count?"

"No, the one that must have dropped from his hand as he fell. There were no other pistols available at the moment, for which reason I provided the weapons. The other was the duplicate of this."

At this juncture the accused's advocate was seen to frown meaningly in his direction, while the shock-

headed prosecutor made a note upon the paper before him.

The president leaned back in his seat, thoughtfully stroking his beard and shutting his eyes, as though to collect further ideas.

"Although you designate yourself as the person challenged, you yet acknowledge having given the provocation to this challenge by your flight with the Countess Sobolewska?"

For the first time the doctor paused for an instant before answering:

"Unhappily, I cannot deny this," he said at last, with the slowness of extreme reluctance.

"And what excuse have you to offer for this—this most condemnable step?" asked the president, gathering his fine brow into a severely judicial frown.

"None, except my overwhelming passion, which swept every other consideration from my mind."

"Had you meditated such a course for long?"

"No, I acted on the impulse of the moment."

"Did Countess Sobolewska follow you readily?"

Again the doctor took a moment before answering. It is likely that in that brief pause—while every woman in the room was painfully holding her breath—his innate vanity and his equally innate sense of chivalry were fighting their last battle.

"No, not very readily; it required much persuasion."

Some of the breaths drawn at the end of that moment of suspense sounded almost like sighs of disappointment. So many of the lookers-on had been persuaded that the woman alone had been to blame.

This time the advocate cleared his throat noisily, as though scarcely able to restrain his irritation, while the prosecutor made another note, showing his yellow teeth in his most agreeable smile.

"Have any of the gentlemen here any further questions to put to the accused?" asked the president, looking first to the right and then to the left.

The advocate general was already on his feet.

"You have said that the pistols for the duel were provided by yourself. Is that a usual course?"

"No, it is even an exceptional one, and was adopted only because there were no other pistols immediately procurable which fulfilled the usual conditions, and because the matter would bear no further delay."

"For what purpose do you keep pistols in the house?"

"For the purpose that such things are usually kept —the possible necessity of self-defence."

"Would not a revolver be more useful for that object?"

"I have a revolver as well."

"Which makes the pistols practically superfluous —except, of course, for such purposes as duels, for instance. I believe this is not the first time that you have been called out?" asked Doctor Petrowicz, smiling more agreeably than ever.

"I have defended my honour whenever I have found it necessary," said the doctor, with perfect equanimity now.

"Precisely. And you have found it necessary more than once. In *this* case (the stress upon the *this*

was calculated for the jury's ears) you do not deny having yourself brought about the circumstances which led to the challenge, although, if I understand you aright, you declare these circumstances to have been the result of a momentary impulse?"

"That is what I said."

"And yet your acquaintance with Countess Sobolewska dates from nearly two years before last August?"

"It dates from December, 189—, when I was first called in to attend upon Count Sobolewski's mother, then suffering from acute rheumatism."

"And from that time you were frequently in the house?"

"As a medical adviser."

"Were there any further illnesses in the house?"

"There were no further illnesses."

"Then the elder Countess Sobolewska's rheumatism must have lasted all through the summer months, I presume. Did you call only when you were sent for by her?"

"Not invariably. My usual road led past the gates of Surowica, and I occasionally entered to inquire after my patient."

"Precisely. And what character did your intercourse with Count Wiktor Sobolewski bear during the period of these visits? Did they remain friendly?"

"Count Sobolewski was rarely at home during that time."

"Precisely," said the advocate-general again, throwing a telling glance towards the jury box out

of his narrow, little eyes, and at the same moment resuming his place with the air of a man who has gained his object.

As he sat down Doctor Weintraub stood up. Upon the usual satisfaction of his shining countenance a cloud had descended. He looked towards the accused with an ill-humour scarcely to be concealed, and with all the resentment which an advocate feels towards a client who obstinately refuses to play into his defender's hands. Also he was unpleasantly haunted, with a persistency to which habit could not blunt him, by the sense of personal disadvantage to which the absence of an official garb reduced him beside the advocate general. It was a cheap amusement to sneer aloud at the *talar* and *barett* as theatrical, but Doctor Weintraub himself knew too much of human nature not to know that in a court of justice—perhaps more than in any other place—the clothes "make the man." The advocate-general in his robes, with his shaggy hair and his lumpy nose, might look more like a dressed-up gorilla than a human being, and yet Doctor Weintraub remained keenly aware that every word that fell from his adversary's lips sounded quite differently in the ears of the jury, simply because it was uttered by a man in robes.

In a slightly dejected voice he now proceeded to put to the accused some questions, the object of which was to bring out the completely casual character of his meeting with Countess Sobolewska on the evening of August 20th.

"You did not know that she was returning home

that day?" was one of the variations he played upon this theme.

"Not in the least. I believed that her absence would certainly last for several weeks more."

"She had signified her arrival by telegram that morning," threw in the advocate general.

"He had no chance of knowing this, seeing that he had not been near Surowica that day, and had spent the afternoon at Oresko with a patient. There is no sign of premeditation to be found anywhere about the matter."

They had wrangled for a few minutes more over this point, when the president, beginning to be bored, thought it time to interfere. Had any of the gentlemen of the jury any questions to put?

There were no questions, mercifully, which left the president free to order the reintroduction of the rest of the accused—singly this time.

And now Doctor Weintraub began to have a rather better time of it, since the fellow-culprits of the chief accused—whether having stood on his side or that of his adversary, and despite the politely veiled contempt with which the two men in uniform obviously regarded the two civilians—seemed to have tacitly united themselves to a band in defence of an almost sacred institution. As a result all were unanimous in describing the *rencontre* as inevitable—thus constituting themselves indirectly into witnesses for the defence; each one of them deposing that Count Sobolewski had been the challenger, had unhesitatingly accepted the class of weapons chosen, just as his seconds, under the urgency of the moment, had had no

scruple in accepting the individual and perfectly "correct" weapons provided—that the Count had fired his shot simultaneously with his adversary, but had missed his mark—that, in fact, no fault was to be found with the perfect regularity of the duel.

The first witness for the prosecution was now directed to be introduced. This was the Roumanian forester who had been the first to discover the body—a black-haired, sunburnt man, who stepped up to his place before the tribunal with something of the instinctively theatrical gestures of all semi-Italian races, and who, having given his evidence through an interpreter, stepped back to the bench for the witnesses—straight behind that of the accused—where he sat rolling his eyes from side to side, as though to see what effect he had produced.

Upon him followed the gendarme who had been the next to see the body—likewise a Roumanian—after whom the various doctors had their say. After them the footman who, by the glimpse he had had of Countess Sobolewska at the window of the train had been the first to put the clue into the hands of his master; then various other servants of the establishment who bore witness to the doctor's frequent and ungrounded visits to Surowica during the summer preceding the flight. A written declaration of Countess Wanda Sobolewska, prevented by illness from appearing in court, was next read out. The Dowager Countess Sobolewska deposed that for several months before the catastrophe she had noted and disapproved of the doctor's frequent visits and evident admiration of her daughter-in-law; that on one occa-

sion she had even called her son's attention to the circumstance, although at that time there had existed no reason for active interference; that in her firm opinion her son's wife had fallen an unwilling victim to the systematic plan of a cold-blooded libertine, of whom it was well known that he had frequently figured in adventures of this kind.

"You hear that?" whispered the blonde beauty to her plain-faced neighbour.

"Quite irrelevant, my dear. How can she not hate the man who has killed her son—her only remaining son, you must remember! Probably she hates the widow as much as the murderer—it's not out of tenderness to her that she pushes all the guilt upon the man, depend upon it; it's just a desperate way of trying to tone down the scandal a bit."

"Any more witnesses for the prosecution?" asked the president, a little wearily.

"Only one."

The advocate-general said it with an almost soothing inflection of voice. Despite the evidence of the seconds, and Doctor Weintraub's skilful attempts at turning each witness inside out, the prospects appeared to him promising. His point was not, as he had quickly perceived, to throw doubts on the fairness of the duel, as a duel, but rather to drive into the jury's head the conviction that the circumstances which led to it had been conjured up, wilfully and frivolously, by the chief accused—and about this there seemed to be no great difficulty. Already the prosecutor was beginning to look more mildly upon the accused—the worst possible symptom for his case,

as every *habitué* of the court knew—with something of that compassionate tolerance with which one looks on the doomed victim.

"Thomasz Morawek, notary, is still upon my list."

"That is her father!" The whisper ran through the crowd, reawakening the flagging attention.

As the notary limped in, his stick rapping against the floor of the court as sharply as ever upon that of his office, the few who knew him could see no outward change about him. It looked as though the catastrophe had left no mark upon that massive face, unless perhaps that it had become a trifle more immovable than formerly, all except the eyebrows, which from time to time gave a single nervous twitch, only to settle down more deeply over the flashing eyes. His first glance was not that almost inevitable one of every witness towards the tribunal, but went straight and unflinchingly to the chief accused, conspicuous in his arm-chair. It was the first time that the notary had set eyes upon the seducer of his daughter, and although none except those close at hand could see what there was in that glance, masked by the down-hanging eyebrows, all could note that before it even the doctor's supreme self-control seemed to totter for a moment, and his colour to fade by another shade. The washed-out woman on the front bench sprang up and stretched over the balustrade with the smelling-salts in her hand. She could not reach him, of course, but a charitable usher, understanding her intention, took the bottle from her hand and gave it to the accused.

"Your name?" began the president his weary

catechism, the monotony of which was this time enlivened by the variety in one of the answers; for instead of the usual reply of "Roman Catholic" or "Greek Catholic" in answer to the question regarding the religious creed, the witness said with superfluous distinctness, as though to ensure a general hearing:

"I belong to no creed. I am *confessionslos.*"

"In that case there can be no question of swearing this witness," remarked the president, looking towards his colleagues with a mixture of astonishment and disapproval on his face, for *confessionslos* individuals were rare in this part of the world, and consequently in his experience. "I presume that the advocate for the defence is of the same opinion."

"Of course an oath is out of the question. I contend only that the evidence loses proportionately in value."

"That is what the jury will decide," said the president, grasping at a favourite phrase. Then, turning once more to the witness:

"What do you know of the circumstances of your daughter's flight with Doctor Stefan Ligrinow? It is said to have taken place directly from your house."

"It took place on the same day that she left my house, but it is my intimate conviction that at the moment of quitting my house she had as little idea of eloping with that man—" and he jerked his head vigorously in the direction of the accused, "as of escaping to the moon."

"What makes you suppose this?"

"Every circumstance of the case. The marriage of my daughter was a perfectly satisfactory one, undisturbed, to the best of my knowledge, by any disagreements. She had accepted Count Sobolewski of her own free will, without the smallest interference on my part, and never, either by letter or word, had she uttered to me a complaint. A week before the elopement she appeared at my house, unannounced, on a visit, a circumstance which I then attributed to a momentary caprice, but which I am now inclined to look upon as a step undertaken to elude the aggressive attentions of the accused, who, for months past, I do not doubt, had been persecuting her with his admiration. Whether he deliberately waylaid her on her return journey, or whether chance put him into the same train with her I cannot say; but am ready to stake my business reputation that she was carried off against her positive will, very likely with the help of some of those half hypnotic influences, of which I believe these 'lady doctors' make so liberal a use."

He shook back his mighty mane to look around at the doctor once more as he said it.

"He also wants to pare down the scandal," remarked the plain-faced critic to her friend; "and yet he must be pretty furious with her too."

"That man's reputation," continued the witness, without waiting to be further interrogated, "is in itself enough to bear out my words. Many of those present must surely have heard of the case of Madame Malenicz or of the daughter of General Brück."

"These circumstances have nothing to do with the present case," interposed the president quickly, though possibly with a little personal regret.

The notary, planting his stick more firmly on the ground, glared at the judges. It was hard, certainly, to have to keep to himself the various significant details regarding the doctor's past, which, in the interval since the catastrophe, he had, with the help of colleagues, succeeded in ferreting out—yet, after that moment of quasi rebellion, the instinctive respect for the incorporation of authority, as represented by these three men behind that green table, carried the day.

"The case for the prosecution is closed," announced the advocate-general a few minutes later, and smiling pleasantly across at Doctor Weintraub, as though to say: "It's your turn to take your innings now!"

But the president, whose eyes had been wandering towards the clock, and who concluded from his personal sensations upon those of the jury, interposed here to order an interruption of half an hour, and promptly disappeared through the door in the background, with his colleagues at his heels.

As upon a given signal accused and witnesses got up from their places and filed out, talking among themselves, as the jury too were doing, while of the spectators only very few moved from their seats. Those provident ones who had brought a biscuit or a piece of chocolate with them now reaped the fruits of their foresight, and the others evidently were of opinion that even the pangs of hunger were more

endurable than the risk of losing their seats before the last act of the play. Upon the front bench, however, a slight commotion had taken place; the bleached woman in the black jet bonnet, having listened with strained attention to the notary's evidence, had now abruptly risen, requesting her neighbours to let her pass. A few sympathetic glances followed her as she made her almost precipitate exit.

"Poor thing! She can't stand it any longer; no wonder, too!" several whispers passed.

"Probably she is going out to look after him!" said some one, with a smile of superior pity; "she is sure to have something strengthening in that hand-bag. She'll be back again when the session is resumed."

But when half an hour later the tribunal re-entered, and accused and witnesses again took their places, the woman in the black jet bonnet had not yet returned.

Then began the second procession of witnesses—those for the defence. The doctor who had attended the duel, and who, but for an act of customary and tacit courtesy, ought by rights to have sat among the accused, confined himself to deposing that Count Wiktor Sobolewski was actually dead when the sound of approaching steps had caused the party to withdraw abruptly, and that consequently the abandonment of a wounded man had not taken place. Upon him followed several witnesses who were to prove that Doctor Ligrinow

had not been at Surowica on August 20th, and had no means of knowing of Countess Sobolewska's impending return; also that he had actually been occupied the whole afternoon at Oresko. These witnesses were numerous, but not especially effective, and in proportion as the benches began to fill up, Doctor Weintraub's natural confidence was visibly fading. The deliberate intention had indeed not been proved, but neither had it been disproved, and much had been said that made it appear likely. As matters now stood the issue principally depended upon what was the jury's private view of duels in general, and glancing at the many comfortable *bourgeois* faces opposite, Doctor Weintraub felt his professional heart sinking within him.

Two more weary hours had trailed past—for even the most sensational case has its deadly dull intervals—and the president's fingers were beginning to play more restlessly with his beard, when, unperceived, an usher slipped into the court, and by a roundabout way approached the advocate's seat. Doctor Weintraub took the note pushed into his hand with more impatience than interest, but as he read it, closely watched by the advocate-general's small eyes, his clouded face began again to shine, first with surprise, and then with what looked like elation.

"Is the case for the defence closed?" the president was just asking, in a voice whose melodiousness was growing exhausted by use.

Doctor Weintraub rose to his feet with a quite new alacrity.

"No; it is not yet closed. I have another witness to propose."

"Which one?" asked the president, just a trifle crossly.

"Countess Sobolewska."

"But she is ill; we have heard her written deposition."

"Not Countess Wanda Sobolewska, but Countess Wiktor Sobolewska, the widow of the fallen man."

It was very much as though an electric shock had run through the room. On the president's face every trace of weariness vanished, while even the laziest among the jury sat up suddenly straight upon their seats, like negligent schoolboys sharply admonished.

"Has she not declined to give evidence?"

"Yes; but in a note I have just received from her she withdraws her refusal. She has an important statement to make which I appeal to the court to give hearing to."

The gorilla-like countenance of the advocate-general became more terrifying than ever to behold under the scowl that descended upon it—it was his way of showing anxiety—while Doctor Ligrinow, dropping the eyeglass on his nose, turned his white face inquiringly towards his advocate, as though dumbly inquiring what this meant. He was met by a vaguely reassuring smile.

A moment's silence followed, during which everybody looked at the president, and the president looked at the advocate-general.

"If the prosecution has no objection," he began at last.

"But I do object to the introduction of a new witness so late in the proceedings," said Doctor Petronicz quickly, half rising in his seat.

"And I appeal to the court to permit it," said Doctor Weintraub, his shining face visibly quivering with anxiety.

Upon this: retirement of the tribunal into their private consulting room, while the audience waited upon thorns to know whether or not they were to be deprived of the supreme satisfaction, dangled for a moment before their eyes. The suspense was not long. Probably the judges themselves, in coming to so rapid a conclusion, were not entirely unmoved by a little human curiosity, for scarcely two minutes had elapsed before they were back again in their places, and the president was announcing in a voice which seemed to have taken a new lease of freshness, that the court accepted the new witness, and that she was to be introduced without further delay.

CHAPTER XIV.

ALONE in the small room of an obscure hotel Romana had been sitting since morning, waiting for the first report which should bring her the verdict of the jury. She had lodged here for six weeks past—ever since that frightful day when Wiktor had appeared like a man distraught in the hotel at Pesth—the last time she had seen him alive, and after which, refusing point-blank to follow either her husband or her lover, she had returned alone to Galicia.

It was Lemberg she had chosen for her first refuge, principally because it was the biggest place at hand, and consequently the one in which she could most easily disappear from the gaze of the crowd; also she did not want to take any further step until Doctor Ligrinow's fate was decided, and she could know for certain whether she was to have the fate of yet another man laid at her door. One was dead already because of her; if this one was condemned, even only to two years of prison, she would have his life to answer for as well, since an intimate certainty told her that his shaken health would not suffice for even the first of these years.

That point once cleared she would have to act in some way—she thought she knew already in which—for it was of course impossible to go on like this,

without plans, without friends, and even without money, since both for her father and for Wiktor's mother she, of course, no longer existed, nor had anything to expect from either.

Would the trial last all day? she asked herself, as she alternately paced the small bedroom with the narrow iron bed, the rickety washhand-stand and the doubtfully white curtains on the window, and sat down to rest upon the one cushioned seat it contained, and whose broken springs gave strange unmusical twangs every time they were pressed. She had been told that the verdict need not be expected before four or five in the afternoon; how could that be? The case was so ridiculously simple. At any rate, she would know before night, even if the conclusion came too late to get into the evening papers, for the report would pour over the town like water let loose. If her window had given on the street she would have set herself to watch it now, in hopes of being able to guess from the demeanour of the passers-by whether or not the trial was over; but the window gained its light from the courtyard, and even that only indirectly through a passage, so that now at midday the room remained wrapped in a sort of thick dusk. She had chosen it principally because it was cheap; but the absence of direct communication with the world, which then had appeared to her an advantage, as giving her a feeling of more complete security from prying eyes, now filled her with a growing impatience. In this dark, remote hole how was it possible to know what was going on outside? While,

to show her face in the streets, to-day of all days, was at least as impossible; was not her photograph in all the windows?

It was past two o'clock when the shuffling step of a waiter stopped before the locked door.

"Can he have brought the news already?" she asked herself with a thrill that was both alarm and hope; "or is it only my food? I believe I have not eaten yet."

It was neither the food nor the expected news, however. Through the chink of the grudgingly opened door the man informed her that a lady wished to speak to her.

"I can speak to nobody," she said, with a hasty movement, as though to close the door; but there was a hand on the handle—not that of the waiter.

"To me you must speak!" said a voice that was strange to her—a woman's voice, almost unmanageable from excitement, and evidently on the point of tears, and in her astonishment at the urgency of its tone, Romana arrested her own gesture. In the next moment the waiter had shuffled back down the passage, and she was alone in the room with a stranger in a black jet bonnet, in whose washed-out face the swollen red eyelids made a painful and almost repulsive contrast. Evidently the visitor, coming straight from the broad daylight, could scarcely see plainly about her, for she peered at Romana's face before speaking, as though to make sure that she was actually there.

"You must have mistaken the room," said Ro-

mana bluntly; "for it is evident that we don't know each other."

Then the stranger seemed to come to her senses.

"Yes, yes; we know each other; you are Countess Sobolewska, are you not? And I am *his* wife—his unhappy wife, come to implore you for his sake!" and she stretched her shaking hands towards Romana's, and would have taken them, had not the other abruptly stepped back.

"Whose wife? I don't understand. To save whom?"

"Stefan, my unfortunate husband, whose passion for you has placed him in so terrible a position. Everything is going against him, even his own evidence, for in his generosity he takes the whole weight of the accusation upon himself. If nothing is done he will go to prison, and out of that prison he will never come alive; you know as well as I to what the agitation of these last weeks has reduced him."

She spoke in a thin voice of entreaty, that was growing more acute with every word, and with her unsteady hands moving uncertainly before her the while, as though she were still groping for those of Romana.

"And how do you want me to save him?"

"By taking at least a little of the guilt upon yourself; it is impossible that it should be all on his side. He would not allow his advocate to insist upon your testimony, but if you have any heart and any generosity you cannot let him bear the whole igno-

miny alone; you will demand to be heard; there is still time. What can you lose, after all? The world has condemned you already; it cannot matter to you whether these twelve jurymen think a little worse of you than they already do." She gazed at Romana with eyes that were all eagerness now, and actually unconscious of the sublime cruelty of her words. "Your evidence alone can get his acquittal—but it must be quickly—quickly, or it may be too late!"

As she stopped, breathless, Romana, looking hard into her quivering face, told herself that perhaps after all this woman had once been good-looking.

"And if he is acquitted?" she asked, in an impulse of curiosity. "You would forgive him?"

"I would forgive him," said the other, irresistibly dropping her eyes before those of Romana. "I have forgiven him on occasions when it was more difficult—far more difficult. Now that I have seen your face I have forgiven him already, for I know that before such faces he has no will."

"You love him as much as that?"

"Yes," was all that Madame Ligrinow said, and she said it a little shamefacedly.

Neither of the two women spoke for a moment, only upon the discoloured cheeks of the elder one the tears of a newly awakened emotion had again begun slowly to flow. Then the fever seized upon her again.

"You will listen to me, will you not? You will come back with me now? The defence must have

begun. It is for him I ask for pity, not for myself—and for you, after all, there is nothing to lose."

"That is true," said Romana, who had been looking at the floor for some moments, and in whose eyes, as she now raised them, a sudden resolution seemed to have lit a new flame.

"Shall I kneel to you?"

"No, no—there is no need," and she stepped back apprehensively. "I am coming, and I shall save him if I can."

At that same moment Madame Ligrinow was at her feet, crying and laughing together.

"Thank you for my life! You have given me back my life! But now quick!" And she was up again, looking about for Romana's hat and gloves. "The court is far off, and it is hard to get a carriage to-day."

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The people who had seen Countess Sobolewska's photograph in the shop-windows—and that was about everybody present—told their friends afterwards that in the moment of her appearance in court they had not been able to make up their minds immediately as to whether they were disappointed or not. In the first place, her veil was down—a thick, black veil, which effectually put her features into shadow—and what they could see of her face through its folds appeared to be of a pallor which was almost leaden. But although there might be doubts about her face, there could be none about her figure, which, all the more prominent for its dusky draperies, stood like a black statue before

the tribunal, showing in its almost rigid immobility those lines and those proportions which are to be found only among the chosen of womankind. Her eyes had turned neither to the right nor to the left, but after a swift glance at the judges, had fixed themselves with capricious tenacity upon the foot of the brass crucifix that stood straight in front of her, between the two brass candlesticks.

Among her closer surroundings the effect of her appearance had gone proportionately deeper. The president's fine white hand, passing caressingly over his beard, was for a moment arrested in its movements, while the advocate-general, whose narrow, little grey eyes were quite equal to piercing a crape veil, felt his first touch of despondency.

"If *she* wants him acquitted he will be acquitted," he inwardly commented.

Although personally far from being susceptible to feminine charms, he was too old a hand at the game of life to underrate their influence. Also it was with a profound professional anxiety that, from her face, his eyes went to the jury opposite, in order to count the susceptible individuals among them, and as he counted, his yellow teeth were ground upon each other. Not that he was quite clear in his mind as to what she actually wanted—surely not to expose herself? Experience made him doubt the probability; and yet her appearance could portend no good, if only for the reason that Doctor Weintraub was so evidently delighted with it.

"Your name?" began the president, in a voice which, no doubt, he honestly believed to be his ordi-

nary official one, but which any one with his eyes tight shut could have guessed to be not addressed to a man, nor even to a plain woman.

"Romana Sobolewska."

Although she spoke low the silence in the court was so complete that every syllable reached the ears even of the spectators in the last row.

"Your state?"

"I am the widow of Count Wiktor Sobolewski."

"Your age?"

"Nineteen."

"Younger than my Lili!" reflected one of the many mothers among the audience, with a pang of pity that drowned even curiosity.

When it came to the question of a religious creed she said, almost in the same words that her father had used:

"I belong to no creed."

"Then you also are *confessionslos?*"

"Yes."

"Another witness who cannot be sworn," said the president, glancing at his colleagues with an attempt at professional indifference, although, in truth, sincerely shocked by the answer.

"Tell us now what you know of the circumstances of your husband's death?"

For a moment she stood silent, trying evidently to find the easiest form for an explanation, and all the time closely studying the brass foot of the crucifix.

"Every one knows the circumstances," she began at last, in a voice which she was evidently making great efforts to steady. "He was killed in a duel."

"By Doctor Ligrinow?"

"Yes; but the challenge came from my husband."

"But the provocation to the challenge came from Doctor Ligrinow? Is it true that, finding you at Pesth, in the same hotel with the accused, he, on his return to Galicia, sent him his seconds?"

It had cost the president no little ingenuity to formulate the question in a manner that should be plain enough, without—in the face of those sombre, yet so youthful eyes—appearing offensive.

"That is true," she said almost in a whisper.

"And that you had travelled there in the doctor's society?"

"Yes."

"Of your own free will?"

During the last minute her chin had been imperceptibly sinking towards her breast, but now she quickly put up her head.

"Of course of my own free will."

"Did Doctor Ligrinow use much persuasion to induce you to follow him?"

She twisted the handle of the umbrella she held once round in her hand before she replied:

"I was willing to follow him."

"That is not true!" said a voice behind her, and, turning quickly, she found herself confronted by the ghastly face of the chief accused, who, with a protesting gesture, had risen to his feet.

"Sit down!" said the president, almost sternly for so courteous a judge. "I can allow no interruption of the evidence."

"Had Doctor Ligrinow ever made you any unsuitable declarations?"

"No, never."

"Nor, ever on any former occasion, proposed to you to fly with him?"

"Never. It was only that day—the idea came quite suddenly."

"But to *him*, surely?"

"Yes, to me—to me!" said the doctor, who had scarcely sat down again, and now rising once more with the vehemence of a man who *will* be heard. "She would not be persuaded. If it had not been that at the moment when she had already risen to descend from the train I was taken suddenly ill, she would most certainly have left me to return home."

Romana had turned round once more towards him.

"You cannot know that," she began, and then stopped short. Her glance, passing beyond the accused, had fallen on the bench of the witnesses, and upon one figure, the most conspicuous among them. It was the first time that father and daughter had met since the day of the latter's departure from Lyczyn—almost it might be said since the interview in the office on the eve, for nothing but a hasty parting had followed upon that—and those who were near enough now to see through the veil were unable to explain to themselves the sudden change of expression. It was a momentary stiffening of all her features, a slow and ominous dilating of the pupils of the eyes, an instinctive straightening of the already erect

figure. For a few moments she stood, doing nothing but only looking at the old man with the lion's mane, who looked back at her, while her white face, having been suffused with one dark flush, became white again,—whiter than before. When she moved at last it was impatiently to push up her veil, as though in want of air, and quite forgetting that she was at last giving the public that full view of her features after which it had been hungering. Despite the bloodlessness of the lips and the shadows under the eyes, that looked almost like brown stains upon the whiteness of her skin, there was not a man in the room who at that moment did not recognise her as beautiful, nor a woman who did not acknowledge the fact, although maybe with a grudge at her heart, while among the many elements that went to make up the very mixed feelings with which the female part of the fashionable crowd regarded her, it would have been difficult to say whether a little masked envy had not its part.

"You cannot know that"—she began her phrase over again, but in a voice into which a quite new energy had entered, and as she spoke she took her eyes, apparently with an effort, off the bench of the witnesses. Every trace of that half constraint with which she had begun to give her evidence was gone from her. The transformation of her whole demeanour, her glance, her movements, her voice, which had followed upon that short pause was unmistakable, even though inexplicable to the lookers on. "Was it not I who first declared my intention of leaving my husband's house?"

The accused stared back at her aghast.

"You would never have made that declaration if I had not confessed to you my passion."

"Did I, or did I not say to you: 'Lead me to the end of the world'?"

This time he stood without speaking, asking himself in his mind whether her reason had given way.

"He does not contradict me—he cannot!" And she looked again towards the judges. "You must believe me when I tell you that the flight was proposed by me, not by him."

The president, who had felt for some minutes that he ought to interfere, but had been too much numbed by surprise to do so, became aware of an opportunity. An admonition to the witness seemed almost demanded by the dignity of the tribunal. Gathering together all his sense of official responsibility, and attempting to wrap himself in the half judicial, half paternal manner which he was accustomed to use towards youthful culprits—but not succeeding very well this time—he asked amid the silence of the court:

"And did no consideration—none of the usual reflections stop you in so—blameworthy a course?"

"What considerations do you speak of?"

"Thoughts of the family life you were destroying—of your responsibilities towards men and towards God."

"I felt myself responsible towards no man, and I don't know of any God—I was not taught that."

"But in your childhood," began the president, coming as near to feeling flurried as it is possible for a president to be.

"Also not in my childhood. Ask him!" and, half turning, she indicated, without looking at him, the notary, where he sat between two other witnesses. Then, as all eyes turned abruptly from her to the massive figure, sitting there in so heavy a quietude, with his unabashed glance looking straight out from under his bushy eyebrows and his stout stick planted before him, she went on, speaking in a sudden hurry, as though in fear of being interrupted.

"That man is my father: he knows what I have been taught, for I have been taught nothing that he has not taught me himself. He will tell you whether there can be a God for me or not; ask him, ask him, do not ask me! Oh, no!" And for a moment it seemed as though her voice were going to break—but it did not, it only rose by another tone. "It is true that I am bad, and you are right to look at me like that, all of you—and yet I am not so bad as *his* daughter ought to be, and not so bad as I am unhappy. Once—not very long ago—I think I was not bad at all. I think I could have been good and happy if *he* would have let me. But he would not; it did not fit into his plans that I should be merely happy. Ask him again! He will tell you how cleverly he managed to cheat me—for he is far cleverer than every one in this room; so clever that I never found it out until it was too late, and I had already married a man I never loved. Perhaps I could have borne my fate if it had not been for that discovery; but after that I went mad—for a day, and everything that I have done was done in my madness!"

All the time she had spoken with that same unrea-

sonable haste, prepared every moment for an interruption, and stopped only now because her panting breath seemed at an end. But she need not have hurried, for neither judge, jury nor prosecutor had recovered their senses enough to think of breaking in. In the jury bench several pairs of lips had positively fallen apart in a perfectly naive consternation, while the president was ruthlessly twisting whole wisps of his beard round and round his fingers, and the advocate-general, leaning on his elbow, pressed his hand against his shaggy head and told himself that the case was lost. Even Doctor Weintraub, though the wildest hopes he had placed on this witness were being richly surpassed, was too much astonished to do more than sit and stare at her in visible bewilderment. The vulture-like neck of the right-hand judge seemed to be stretching ever more out of his violet-edged cape, under the influence of increasing surprise, while of the left-hand one it was later asserted that tears had been seen to glisten in his comfortable blue eyes. From the bench where the medical experts sat, one doctor gazed at the witness critically, and hurriedly gave orders for fresh water to be brought. Some people in the back rows of the spectators had got up, in order to be able to look over the heads in front of them. One excited looker-on very far back had actually mounted on to his seat. The president, catching sight of him, was thankful to have found an opportunity for asserting his authority by the administration of a sharp admonition. In a greater or lesser degree the agitation seemed to have caught every person in the big hall,

even the fellow-culprits of the accused, and even the witnesses on the two long benches. Only the notary's contemptuous lips had not quivered for a moment, nor his glance fallen before that turned upon him. In the moment that she paused he rose ponderously to his feet.

"Since the witness herself testifies to the—possibly only momentary derangement of her mind, I propose to the court that the rest of her evidence be dispensed with," he said aloud, and with a steadiness which sent a fresh shock through the hall.

In the expectant pause that followed Romana made a step nearer to her father, and the movement was so suggestive, even stealthy, that more than one person asked themselves alarmed whether she had not a knife in her hand.

"The rest of the evidence?" she said, more slowly than she had been speaking a minute ago; " the rest of the evidence is not worse than this. It will only tell them how you got me to believe a person false and faithless when all the time he was true and loyal, and it will tell them what they know already: that I am a lost woman, and that you have lost me. Have any of you got fathers?"—and she looked towards the women on the front bench, who were not more than a dozen paces from her, but whose faces swam before her shining eyes;—"and do you believe in them? Do you respect them? All that is stupid confidence—believe me! Do not imagine that a father needs to be loyal to his child—that is an old prejudice. 'Father,' after all, is only a word like any other, and can be as hollow as any other."

While she said it her eyes met another pair looking at her in consternation from among the front row of spectators. Their washed-out gaze seemed to bring back something to her mind. She put up her hand, pressing her fingers to her temple, as though in a violent effort of memory. What was it that she was here for? Why was she speaking?

"For me it has been hollow, and that is why I went mad for a day; but it is not right that the man you have accused should suffer for my madness. What has he done that is so bad? He has killed a man, but not deliberately—not so deliberately as he whom unhappily I call father killed the whole joy of my life. If you will condemn somebody, condemn that old man before you—it is he who is the author of it all—it is he who sowed the seed and should reap the reward. He is the real criminal, and not that poor sick man in the chair over there. Don't be softened because his hair is growing white—it is in no noble work that it has grown white—it is only in the toiling after money; look at my black hairs, rather than at his white ones, look at my eyes, my lips, my hands, —had I not the right to be happy?—and judge of what he has robbed me!"

There was a murmur breaking out around her, and even before she had done speaking the hall was in a tumult. Such a face had not been seen, such a voice had not been heard within the walls of the Landesgericht since they stood—or at least not within the recollection of any one present. It was no longer the constrained witness in mourning who had entered a quarter of an hour ago, and about whose

beauty there had even been a momentary hesitation—it was neither the fallen woman whom they saw before them now, nor even a merely desperate woman—it was a goddess of Revenge who towered there, with eyes that blazed inhumanly, and a voice that rang through the closely packed hall as resoundingly as though it rolled back from empty walls. This was one of those moments which never come more than once in a lifetime—nor come in every lifetime—in which elementary passion, stripping from it the coverings which usage, discretion, even decency have wrapped around our inner man, shows itself in its primeval nakedness, and instead of blushing for that nakedness, glories in it. The men who stared with bated breath, the women who gazed with affrighted eyes and blanched cheeks, felt it dimly, and dimly, too, even the most narrow-minded among them understood that ordinary standards would not do here—that neither her sin nor her sorrow could count now, that she was not even to be pitied, but rather to be envied for the triumph of that hate which was making her so beautiful and so terrible, a hate that had hungered and had thirsted and which was at last having its fill. And among the lookers-on it was the women more than the men who said to themselves, awe-stricken: "To be able to hate like this, how she must be able to love!" Even the doctor who had sent for the glass of water saw the mistake he had made when he had imagined for one moment that this woman could break down—now. And yet the water had not been brought in vain, for one woman had

fainted among the audience, and half a dozen more were weeping as hysterically as though they were witnessing a tragedy on the boards.

Desperately, with that abrupt forgetfulness of forms which characterises all moments of infectious excitement, the crowd struggled to gain at least one glimpse of a sight which each individual felt would remain solitary of its kind. Neither the president's voice nor his bell could hope to put order now in the rebellious court, where it was no longer a solitary spectator, but whole rows of fashionably dressed women who mounted upon their seats to gain a better view, not only of the denouncer, but also of the denounced, of whom neither a man nor a woman within the hall could understand how the gaze turned upon him did not weigh him to the floor.

Whole minutes passed before enough quiet was restored for another voice to be heard. It was that of the chief accused, who for the third time now had risen to speak.

"I protest against the form of the defence," he began, deeply moved. "I will not be acquitted on false premises—"

This time she turned upon him with a movement that in its swiftness was almost savage.

"Be quiet! you have nothing to say in the matter. You *were* nothing to me in the matter all along. I was not thinking of you at all, I was thinking of *him* when I ordered you to take me to the end of the world. It was *him* I wanted to strike through you, for I knew that nothing could strike him so surely

as this. I had to be revenged—don't you understand? You were only my instrument to my revenge—nothing more!"

Covering his face with his hands, the doctor sank back into his seat, not to speak again.

The president looked towards the advocate general in dumb interrogation, but Doctor Petrowicz shook his head in as dumb a renunciation. Doctor Weintraub, too, acting on the principle of letting well alone, had no questions to put. This gave the signal for the president's summing up, but, brief though he made it, it was scarcely listened to. From the moment that the last witness had, at her request, been led from the room, the strained attention of the court suddenly flagged. No one even thought of a condemnation now, nor of the man who had been formally accused; abruptly he had lost his entire importance beside that other man whose sentence stood written on every face around him, from whose side even his two neighbours on the witness bench had fearfully drawn away.

What followed were not more than empty forms. The advocate-general himself, being the first to recognise this fact, confined his speech to a condemnation of duelling in general, rather than of this case in particular; while Doctor Weintraub, whose efforts at brevity were almost heroic, adopted the method of throwing himself into an attitude of exaggerated admiration for the self-sacrifice of the woman whose evidence had cleared his client.

"The fault is not hers," he proclaimed, under the growing impatience of the court, "but that of her

unfortunate education; yet that fault it was, and not any intention of the accused which led to the catastrophe. Can any one in this room doubt the evidence which we have just heard? Could anything but the sincerest remorse have dictated the moral sacrifice she has just accomplished before all our eyes? Gentlemen of the jury, do not allow that sacrifice to have been made in vain! You have seen her with your eyes, and can judge of the urgency of the temptation into which the accused was thrust. Could he, being a man, have acted otherwise than he did? We are men ourselves—weak men, gentlemen—is there one among us who, if such a woman said to us: 'Lead me to the end of the world!' would answer 'No'? If such a man sits among you let him condemn the accused, but let him be sure also that he be not putting an impossible task to his virtue!"

He sat down, wiping his shining face, and shedding the scent of rose pomade more profusely than ever around him. It was easy to see from the folds of his fleshy lips that one person in the room at least was satisfied with the speech for the defence.

The last act of the drama passed as rapidly as the rigid forms allowed. A few superfluous words from the advocates defending the other accused; a brief retirement of the tribunal to consult upon the questions to be put; the reading out of these questions to the jury, their retirement—likewise brief—and their return with a verdict of twelve voices, which, by admitting the existence of "irresistible circumstances," was, practically, a verdict of acquittal.

It was over now, except for the rising of every

person within those four walls to listen to the sentence of liberation pronounced by the president, for which solemn moment the advocate-general, in a worse humour than he had been in for long, savagely rammed his *barett* on to his head.

As the spectators, gorged with the excitements of the afternoon, began to fight for the passage to the doors, it was only a few among them who heard a gasping sound, and noticed a commotion about the chair of the man who had just been acquitted, but who, having made only one step towards the door, had staggered back into his seat with his hand against his side. Nor did many people observe the half-exultant, half-distracted woman who, across the dividing rail, was stretching her arms towards him, and who, a few minutes later, held him in her meagre arms, with his nerveless head pillowed against her shoulder.

CHAPTER XV.

LATE that same night, by the light of a single candle, Romana sat alone in her hotel room. The reaction from the wild triumph of the afternoon had left her so physically exhausted as to be scarcely beautiful. On the table, besides the candle, there stood nothing but a small bottle of a clouded, whitish liquid; and towards it her eyes went back continually, as though drawn by some unseen thread.

Mixed with the profound exhaustion was a sense of something that could only be satisfaction. She was beginning to understand that it had been almost a necessity to say out loud what she had said to-day, and that when she yielded to Madame Ligrinow's prayers it had not been solely at the prompting of her intrinsically generous heart, but also on that of some deeper-lying urgency, to which the sight of her father's face had given the final impulse.

And now that she had done it—had marked him in the face of the world, had herself broken the conventions of that world, she was asking herself: "What next?" It had been what she had wanted to do, what she was glad that she had done—but the total rupture accomplished, what course remained open to her? Only one, it seemed to her, as again her eyes returned to the small, white bottle. She had brought it with her from Pesth, where she had

procured it on the morrow of her arrival there—but had not yet had the courage to use it. She had meant to wait until she knew the fate of the man who had killed her husband. Now she knew it; was there any further reason for postponement? What else was there that she could possibly do? What place remained open to her in the world? Every other person who had played a part in the history of her life had at least the possibility of going on with their existence. Her father would return to his office, no doubt, and peacefully make his million full; even Doctor Ligrinow, despite the blood-stain on his hand, would be tenderly welcomed back—was already tenderly welcomed back to his home—to be nursed back to what health he ever possessed. Felix Weber would find peace, no doubt, if not happiness, in the consciousness of doing his duty; had he not been able to speak of peace already in that letter written in the moment that had probably been that of his most acute suffering? And Time could do so much, and Aniela was so devoted. But she? What could Time possibly do for her? Never again take from her that stain which she had put upon herself openly to-day, and which would help, no doubt, to efface within the heart of her only true lover the last outline of her image. She was one of those women who seem to be created for the love of men, and to whom yet the love of men brings only its curses and none of its blessings.

No, there was nothing for it but the little white bottle on the table. But it would be better to wait

until the hotel had gone finally to sleep. Her candle would last till then, she thought. It would have to be done before it burned out; she did not think that her courage would be equal to the dark.

"But why had it come to this?" she asked herself, with that striving after a comprehensive review of the situation which assails most people who believe themselves close to their last hour. "Was it only because my father is bad? Other people have bad fathers, and yet manage not to despair; other women lose their lovers and yet keep their will and their reason. I am not weak, I am sure of that. Why, then, could I not bear my burden?"

In the fit of deep brooding into which she fell, it seemed to her all at once as though she saw again before her first the foot of the brass crucifix which she had looked at so long that afternoon, and then the pedestal of that inartistic statue in the park of Saint Ursula's with its half-effaced inscription:

"Come unto me all ye that are weary and are burdened and I will refresh you!"

Already then she had told herself what a pity it was that those words were not true, and the sense of regret came over her again now, more acutely.

"It *ought* to be true!" she reflected with her chin in her hands and her eyes staring into the flame of the candle; "there ought to exist some one or something on which one can throw everything,—who is strong enough to support even the most cruel grief, the most complete despair."

That such a being should not exist made her feel

at this moment as though she had been cheated of something to which the mere fact of her own existence gave her a right.

"Even Nature, common, material Nature does not ask of her creatures more than they can give; fish are not put into the water without fins to swim with, nor birds told to fly without wings. Is it fair that only *we* should be so badly equipped against life?"

Dropping her hands to her knees, she sat up abruptly, with her eyes still on the flame of the candle.

How if she *had* been cheated, after all? not by the God who ought to exist, but by the man who had told her that he did not?—the same man who had cheated her of everything else—the innocence of her youth, the happiness of love—of whom nothing was too bad to be believed? If that was so, then that which made those black-veiled nuns so serene in the face of death would be no phantasmagoria, but a truth, and might possibly have made her strong in the face of life, even though it were bitterer than death. He had done much that was black, but if he had withheld this secret from her it was the blackest of all his acts. In the depth of her spirit she felt this conviction, and another fearful reproach was added to the mountain of reproaches already heaped within her soul.

"When I drink out that bottle he will have killed me as surely as though he had held it to my lips. Shall I not write to tell him so? That only could make the revenge complete."

She looked again at her candle; if she wanted to write even a few lines it would be well to hurry. She had risen and was looking about for pen and paper when the passage outside, almost silent for a quarter of an hour past, was disturbed by the familiar shuffling step. The waiter, in a sleepy voice, was murmuring something through the key-hole.

"He can bring me another candle," was the thought with which she went to the door. Another candle meant a respite, which, in the teeth of all logic, she found herself welcoming.

"For you!" said the man crossly, holding a folded telegram towards her.

She took it silently, almost suspiciously from his hand. It seemed so unlikely that any one should take enough interest of the friendly sort in her, to think of addressing her a telegram.

"Can I have the receipt?" said the sleepy waiter, unheedful of the astonishment which was spreading over her face as she stood with the open paper in her hand.

She did not answer, seemingly lost in thought.

"Can I have the receipt?"

"Immediately. When does the next train start in the Krakow direction?"

"At two o'clock."

"I am going by that. You must order me a cab at once."

"And the bill?" asked the man, in a worse humour than ever.

"I shall pay, of course; but order the cab."

The message she had received was signed "Wanda Sobolewska," and contained only a few words:

"Come to me at once. I am very ill and must speak to you."

It had been despatched at eleven o'clock from the Rutkow station—scarcely an hour ago.

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When in the early morning of the following day —a misty October morning, which made the trees in the park of Surowica appear like islands swimming on a white sea—Romana went up the steps of the house that had been her home, she was not yet clear in her mind as to why she had obeyed her mother-in-law's message. It had been urgent, it is true, but it came from a woman who had always been her outspoken enemy, and who probably now saw in her the assassin of her son. Perhaps Countess Sobolewska thought herself dying, and wanted to curse her—more or less explicitly—before closing her eyes. Had it been necessary to heap yet this ignominy upon her own head?

"Is the Countess very ill?" she asked of the elderly female domestic who was conducting her to her mistress' apartment. This woman was the most ancient of the family retainers, a former nurse of Wiktor's, who had remained on in the quality of semi-housekeeper, semi-maid. Now that she saw her long, deeply seamed face again, with the smooth bands of yellowish white hair above it, Romana remembered quite distinctly having recognised her yesterday in one of the foremost rows of spectators in the Lemberg court of justice. It had been one of those sub-

conscious recognitions which sometimes leave no trace, unless revived by subsequent circumstances. No doubt Madame Sobolewska, unable to attend in person, had despatched this confidential attendant to bring her back the account of the trial. The distasteful thought put an additional shadow upon Romana's sombre face.

"The Countess has not been herself since the sad news came," replied the woman, in a neutral-tinted voice which said nothing. "It is not certain that she will live."

In a broad, richly curtained bed, and against a perfect mountain of lace-trimmed pillows, Countess Sobolewska lay in state, awaiting her daughter-in-law. Her grey-white face, with the wisps of thin hair straying over the temples, looked, if possible, less attractive than usual, while the peculiar fold of the pursed-up mouth seemed more conspicuous in this position than in any other. Owing to the lowered blinds Romana could not see her features plainly until she had walked close up to the bed, which she did slowly, almost fearfully, as though expecting each moment to be met by some word that might be too hard to bear. But the old woman in the bed said nothing until she was close at hand. And even then it seemed as though the first words were still too difficult to speak, for several moments passed, during which Madame Sobolewska, her lips more tightly compressed than ever, silently examined Romana's face, and Romana herself under that gaze began to tremble convulsively.

"I know you must hate me," she said at last,

breaking the unbearable silence. "But was it necessary to send for me to tell me so? Everything that you can tell me I know already—oh, so well, so well!"

Then only the tight lips unlocked, and the old Countess, turning on her pillows, seized Romana by the wrist in a grip so vigorous that it did not seem to be that of a sick woman.

"Child! Child!" she was saying in her most rasping voice. "Why did you never tell me that you were so unhappy as that?"

For a moment longer Romana stood, wondering and not understanding, trying to read the meaning of this in that grey face on the pillow. Then in one instant it was as though the strain had become impossible to bear any longer, and sinking down on to the floor beside the bed, she burst into that delivering flood of tears which ought to have come long ago, and for the want of which she had been on the point of perishing. Having come at last, it seemed as though it could not cease. Hot and unquenchable the tears ran from between the fingers she had pressed upon her face, staining her black dress with their salt drops, while the sobs that made them flow seemed to be tearing her breast asunder. Minutes, many minutes passed before the storm began to abate, and during this time the only witness to it looked on immovable and in silence, too wise to interfere, possibly too well experienced in the matter of such outbursts to be seriously alarmed.

As much physically as mentally exhausted, Romana sat still at last, her head resting against the

side of the bed, a stray sob still occasionally rising to her throat and sending a tremor over her whole body. Upon her hair she felt something which she knew to be a hand, laid there a moment ago, in one of those half-uncertain, half-awkward caresses, which betray the want of practice in these things.

"How did you know that I was unhappy?" asked Romana at last, unsteadily.

"In the same way that everybody knows it now. Olimpia was in court yesterday and reported to me every word that was spoken there."

"But that ought to make you despise me more than ever."

"Perhaps it ought—perhaps it would, if I had not been unhappy myself."

"Unhappy, yes—but never guilty."

"Never tempted, you mean—because I was never beautiful. Believe me, my dear, that was the chief difference between us—not the other. But I want to hear everything, and to hear it from yourself. What Olimpia brought back with her was, after all, but the fragments of a history—I want you to put them together for me now."

Then, still sitting on the floor, with her head against the side of the bed, Romana began, for the first time in her life, to uncover her heart to a woman—a strange, new experience in which she found it difficult to believe, and yet which drew her on irresistibly. And as she spoke low and fast, at moments almost incoherently, the grey-haired head upon the pillow nodded occasionally as though to say: "Yes, yes, I know—I understand—that is

the way it is"—and the keen old eyes looked at the black waves of hair, which was all they could see, with a pity that well-nigh yearned. Only the wide mouth did not seem able to relax. It had remained pursed up into its present expression for so many years that, like a sheet of paper that has been folded for too long, it could no more lose the mark of the crease.

"And why did you not tell me all this long ago?" she asked when Romana again sat silent.

"Because I thought you hated me."

"So I did—almost; but that was because you did not love him, and therefore could not save him. I thought you could not love, but now I know that it was only that you could love too well. We have been unhappy in different fashions, but one sort of unhappiness is very like another, after all, and that is why I am able to understand everything you have told me."

"You can't well be more unhappy than I am," said Romana with a broken laugh. "Do you know what I was thinking of doing when your telegram came last night?"

"Very likely of taking poison," said Madame Sobolewska composedly.

"I was. I am not sure, but I think I would have had the courage."

"I expected something of the sort; that is why I sent off the message in such a hurry. But do you think that that means that your grief is heavier than mine? It only means that I have supports that you have not."

Romana looked at the mother's ravaged face and bowed her head in remorseful silence. Oh, what a failure she had made, not only of her own life, but also of what remained of this life beside her! A little more forbearance, a little less pride, a moment of confidence, which any chance might have brought about, and everything might have been changed, she herself saved from the desperate lengths to which she had gone.

The clumsy hand had again laid itself heavily upon her hair.

"You will stay with me now, child, will you not? He was not often here, it is true—and yet, now that I know that he cannot come back, I feel rather too much alone."

Then as Romana turned impetuously to kiss the fingers that caressed her, she added with a smile that was meant to be reassuring:

"It will not be for long."

CHAPTER XVI.

On the last day of December the notary sat alone in his office. The windows were coated with crystals, for the frost was sharp outside, but here in the business sanctuary the fire still smouldered in the stove, filling the small space with a pleasant warmth. It was so late that even the clerks in the outer office had retired; the notary had waited until he heard their retreating steps before proceeding to the task which he had set himself for to-night.

Since his return from the attendance of the trial at Lemberg he had not moved from Lyczyn, and scarcely from his office. For all the public eye could see that terrible day had made no change in the man. On the morrow of his return he had taken up his work again where he had interrupted it, exactly as if nothing had happened, and had not flagged for a moment since. It was only the elder of his two clerks, a man who had worked for fifteen years beneath him, who began gradually to discover that despite the passiveness of that rugged face and the effrontery with which that broad brow seemed ready to brave the judgment of the world, there were, after all, some small changes—a sharper tone of voice, a greater brevity of speech and a few new furrows about the eyes. What the rest of the world

until the hotel had gone finally to sleep. Her candle would last till then, she thought. It would have to be done before it burned out; she did not think that her courage would be equal to the dark.

"But why had it come to this?" she asked herself, with that striving after a comprehensive review of the situation which assails most people who believe themselves close to their last hour. "Was it only because my father is bad? Other people have bad fathers, and yet manage not to despair; other women lose their lovers and yet keep their will and their reason. I am not weak, I am sure of that. Why, then, could I not bear my burden?"

In the fit of deep brooding into which she fell, it seemed to her all at once as though she saw again before her first the foot of the brass crucifix which she had looked at so long that afternoon, and then the pedestal of that inartistic statue in the park of Saint Ursula's with its half-effaced inscription:

"Come unto me all ye that are weary and are burdened and I will refresh you!"

Already then she had told herself what a pity it was that those words were not true, and the sense of regret came over her again now, more acutely.

"It *ought* to be true!" she reflected with her chin in her hands and her eyes staring into the flame of the candle; "there ought to exist some one or something on which one can throw everything,—who is strong enough to support even the most cruel grief, the most complete despair."

That such a being should not exist made her feel

at this moment as though she had been cheated of something to which the mere fact of her own existence gave her a right.

"Even Nature, common, material Nature does not ask of her creatures more than they can give; fish are not put into the water without fins to swim with, nor birds told to fly without wings. Is it fair that only *we* should be so badly equipped against life?"

Dropping her hands to her knees, she sat up abruptly, with her eyes still on the flame of the candle.

How if she *had* been cheated, after all? not by the God who ought to exist, but by the man who had told her that he did not?—the same man who had cheated her of everything else—the innocence of her youth, the happiness of love—of whom nothing was too bad to be believed? If that was so, then that which made those black-veiled nuns so serene in the face of death would be no phantasmagoria, but a truth, and might possibly have made her strong in the face of life, even though it were bitterer than death. He had done much that was black, but if he had withheld this secret from her it was the blackest of all his acts. In the depth of her spirit she felt this conviction, and another fearful reproach was added to the mountain of reproaches already heaped within her soul.

"When I drink out that bottle he will have killed me as surely as though he had held it to my lips. Shall I not write to tell him so? That only could make the revenge complete."

She looked again at her candle; if she wanted to write even a few lines it would be well to hurry. She had risen and was looking about for pen and paper when the passage outside, almost silent for a quarter of an hour past, was disturbed by the familiar shuffling step. The waiter, in a sleepy voice, was murmuring something through the key-hole.

"He can bring me another candle," was the thought with which she went to the door. Another candle meant a respite, which, in the teeth of all logic, she found herself welcoming.

"For you!" said the man crossly, holding a folded telegram towards her.

She took it silently, almost suspiciously from his hand. It seemed so unlikely that any one should take enough interest of the friendly sort in her, to think of addressing her a telegram.

"Can I have the receipt?" said the sleepy waiter, unheedful of the astonishment which was spreading over her face as she stood with the open paper in her hand.

She did not answer, seemingly lost in thought.

"Can I have the receipt?"

"Immediately. When does the next train start in the Krakow direction?"

"At two o'clock."

"I am going by that. You must order me a cab at once."

"And the bill?" asked the man, in a worse humour than ever.

"I shall pay, of course; but order the cab."

The message she had received was signed "Wanda Sobolewska," and contained only a few words:

"Come to me at once. I am very ill and must speak to you."

It had been despatched at eleven o'clock from the Rutkow station—scarcely an hour ago.

* * * * * * *

When in the early morning of the following day —a misty October morning, which made the trees in the park of Surowica appear like islands swimming on a white sea—Romana went up the steps of the house that had been her home, she was not yet clear in her mind as to why she had obeyed her mother-in-law's message. It had been urgent, it is true, but it came from a woman who had always been her outspoken enemy, and who probably now saw in her the assassin of her son. Perhaps Countess Sobolewska thought herself dying, and wanted to curse her—more or less explicitly—before closing her eyes. Had it been necessary to heap yet this ignominy upon her own head?

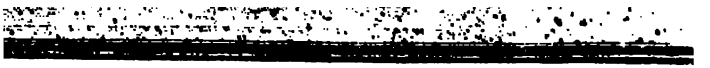
"Is the Countess very ill?" she asked of the elderly female domestic who was conducting her to her mistress' apartment. This woman was the most ancient of the family retainers, a former nurse of Wiktor's, who had remained on in the quality of semi-housekeeper, semi-maid. Now that she saw her long, deeply seamed face again, with the smooth bands of yellowish white hair above it, Romana remembered quite distinctly having recognised her yesterday in one of the foremost rows of spectators in the Lemberg court of justice. It had been one of those sub-

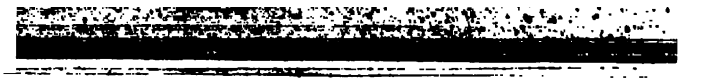
conscious recognitions which sometimes leave no trace, unless revived by subsequent circumstances. No doubt Madame Sobolewska, unable to attend in person, had despatched this confidential attendant to bring her back the account of the trial. The distasteful thought put an additional shadow upon Romana's sombre face.

"The Countess has not been herself since the sad news came," replied the woman, in a neutral-tinted voice which said nothing. "It is not certain that she will live."

In a broad, richly curtained bed, and against a perfect mountain of lace-trimmed pillows, Countess Sobolewska lay in state, awaiting her daughter-in-law. Her grey-white face, with the wisps of thin hair straying over the temples, looked, if possible, less attractive than usual, while the peculiar fold of the pursed-up mouth seemed more conspicuous in this position than in any other. Owing to the lowered blinds Romana could not see her features plainly until she had walked close up to the bed, which she did slowly, almost fearfully, as though expecting each moment to be met by some word that might be too hard to bear. But the old woman in the bed said nothing until she was close at hand. And even then it seemed as though the first words were still too difficult to speak, for several moments passed, during which Madame Sobolewska, her lips more tightly compressed than ever, silently examined Romana's face, and Romana herself under that gaze began to tremble convulsively.

"I know you must hate me," she said at last,





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